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*cine***ACTION** **PERFORMANCE**



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44

This issue on performance was conceived to open up an area which often doesn't receive critical attention. Although there is current discussion surrounding the notion of the celebrity, we are thinking about performance in terms of creative work and its contribution to both narrative meaning and a broader concept of a star's persona and identity. In terms of the latter, we are pleased to include a number of articles which illustrate a wide ranging definition of performance. These cover contemporary actors (John Travolta, Miranda Richardson) as well as actors from Hollywood's classical era (Marilyn Monroe, Dorothy Dandridge, Robert Mitchum). There are two articles on Dorothy Dandridge, in part because she is a major talent and presence long overlooked and in part because the writers take different positions on the significance and reading of her star image. Interestingly, the longstanding categorization of Dandridge and Monroe as 50s sex goddesses fails to consider both women's vital talent and professional commitment, beyond objectification and victimization.

Performance remains one of the areas that serious film criticism has yet to explore. This may be attributable to the difficulties of articulating the mechanics of acting styles and the allusiveness of distinguishing a star's presence and constructed identity from the activity of performing. Nevertheless, the performer and performance are an essential component of what produces cinematic meaning; to slight this area is to undervalue not only the actor's function in the construction of a film's significance but also the personal pleasures and cultural gratifications and value their talent and presence can provide.

*Florence Jacobowitz
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FRONT COVER: Marilyn
Monroe, Twentieth Century-
Fox, 1953. Photo: Frank
Powolny

INSIDE FRONT: James Stewart,
publicity shot for *Harvey*, 1950

BACK COVER: John Travolta,
Staying Alive, 1983

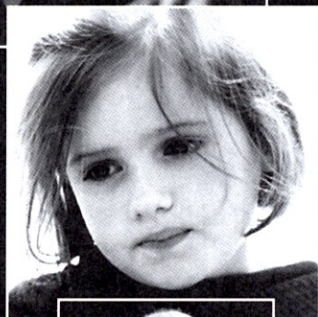
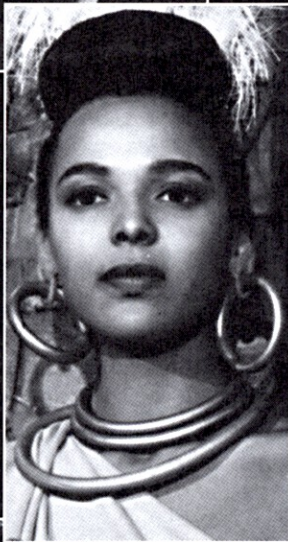
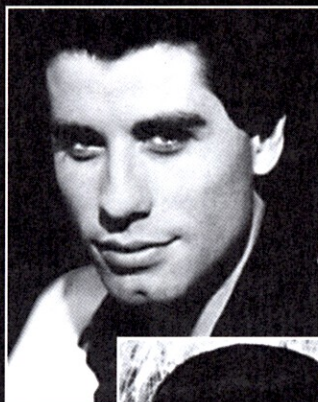
INSIDE BACK: Dorothy
Dandridge, *Carmen Jones*, 1954



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Staying Alive in the 90s: Travolta as Star and the Performance of Masculinity

by Jesse Zigelstein



Saturday Night Fever
(1977)

FEW MALE MOVIE STARS HAVE BEEN AS OVERTLY

spectacularized as the young John Travolta. Indeed, Travolta's early popular persona is commonly condensed into a single still image of the star in his "white suit and platform heels, a human clock forever stuck at four, with his right arm pointed vertically at the ceiling, his left diagonally at the dance floor" (Cohn 191). This image, extracted from a dance performance in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), is moreover distinguished by the way in which all aspects of its *mise-en-scène*—from lighting and décor through figure position and costume—conspire to make Travolta the object of the erotic spectacle. According to Jeff Yanc, this "feminizing" objectification of Travolta's body is countered, at least in *Fever* and *Staying Alive* (1983), by "a blatantly overdetermined construction of masculinity" (39) effected by narrative and stylistic procedures that hyperbolize the looking privileges and active agency that are conventionally conferred upon the male protagonist. And while the ideological contradictions of a star's dramatic persona are often elided in the construction of his or her popular image, in Travolta's case the dynamic tension that Yanc points to was at least acknowledged by the publicity apparatus. Indeed, a contemporary journalistic profile, in which "pin-up" photographs of a semi-nude Travolta command more space than interview text, relates the star's popular image in terms of the synthesis of gendered qualities: Travolta is "macho but vulnerable" (Collins "Sex" 14), a smug narcissist whose body is nevertheless perpetually fetishized, a hyperconfident heterosexual whose appeal is described as "androgynous" (Collins "Sex" 19).

Given the elements of "pin-up" passivity, gender ambiguity, and fluid sexuality within even his popularly accepted star image, Travolta's marginalization during the politically and culturally conservative 1980s is not surprising. Indeed it seems in retrospect almost inevitable that Travolta should have been replaced as an embodiment of idealized masculinity by action film stars like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, paradigmatic Reagan heroes both, whose "hard body" images were implicitly defined against the symbolically "soft" 70s American male, for which Travolta, no less than Jimmy Carter, served as emblem.¹ Less predictable than Travolta's slide from cultural centrality in the 80s—the period between 1983 and 1989 is marked by his virtually complete absence from the mainstream mediascape—has been his subsequent comeback in the 1990s.

Travolta's comeback required change in his image: the complex totality of meanings that had clustered around his persona over twenty years had to be renegotiated in order to restore him to prominence. The remarkable result of this renegotiation has been the near complete transcendence of his early image (and certainly of its culturally rejected components) and his reemergence as one of the highest-paid and most commercially successful movie stars of the decade. Given that the successful Hollywood comeback generally indicates the renewed popular acceptance of a particular way of being a gendered subject—in Travolta's case, a particular way of being a "man"—the star's new dramatic persona, and the films through which this persona is articulated, becomes

a text whose meanings are extremely pertinent to the analysis of contemporary culture. My reading of Travolta's recent films focuses on the kinds of masculinity that the star is meant to embody, and how the male figures that he portrays function within their respective narrative texts. Further, I will also suggest that masculinity in these films repeatedly intersects with the notion of *performance*. Indeed, performance figures both as an important term in Travolta's reconstructive movement from an *eroticized object* (the past) to a *serious actor* (the present) and as a recurrent motif around which questions and concerns about the present state of masculinity often cluster.

Performance and Redemption: *Pulp Fiction*

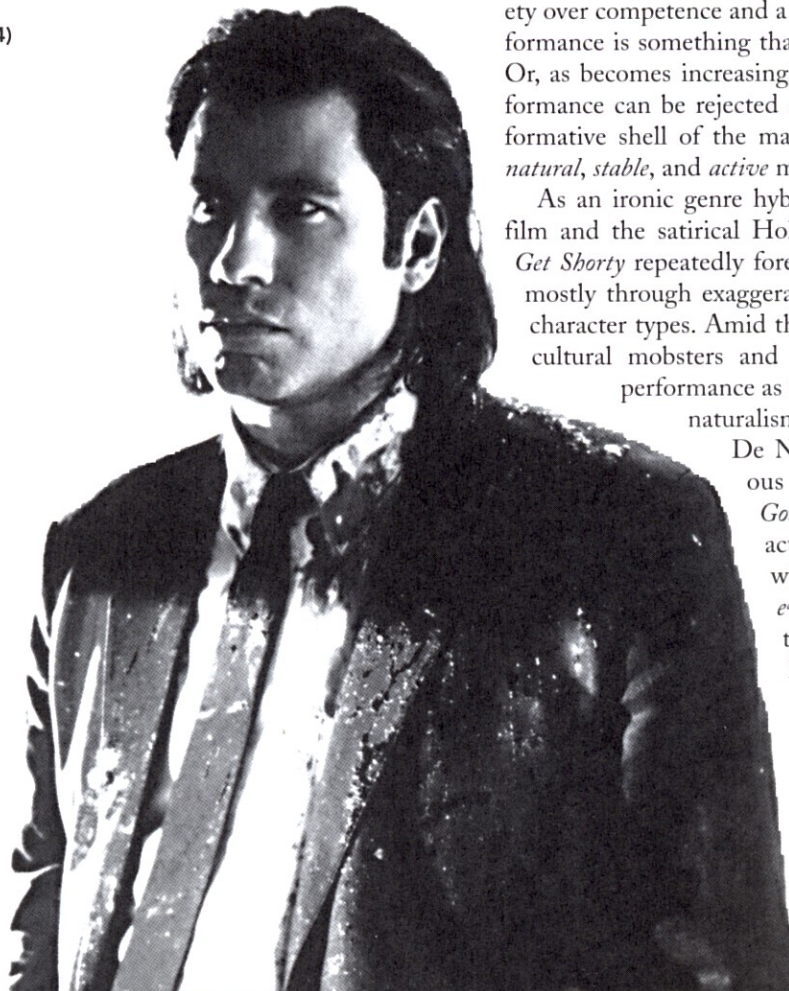
Quentin Tarantino, not unlike Hollywood's mass audience, cannot forget the '70s Travolta persona. Indeed, as several journalistic critics have pointed out, *Pulp Fiction* repeatedly asks its spectator to read the character of Vincent Vega in relation to Travolta's early star image. Generally this process tends to call attention to Vincent's *differences*—in terms of body shape, gestures and physical movement, facial features, age, etc.—from the image of Travolta reified in popular memory. In a sense these differences signify a kind of deterioration—from iconic masculinity to clumsy male anxiety, a declining arc whose exemplary moment is the film's notorious "twist contest" scene, in which Vincent's "drugged gyrations" (Amis 216) cannot help but recall the lost mastery of the dance floor king. Indeed, for many critics Vincent serves as the fulcrum for the film's play on "masculinity and the anxiety of the male hero" (Fried 6). While not as insistent as *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992) on the link between masculinity and the performance of a role, *Pulp Fiction* nevertheless foregrounds the artifice of Vincent's gangster persona. In preparation for their dramatic entrance preceding a "hit" job, Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) instructs Vincent to "get into character." Clearly the maintenance of this "character" constitutes a struggle for Vincent. He compensates by using heroin to bolster his confidence, but retreats periodically to the bathroom to "consolidate his . . . image" (Willis 44) and rehearse dialogue appropriate to his character. Indeed, Vincent's dialogue, his amusing linguistic dexterity—a calculated inversion of Travolta's '70s inarticulateness—is a crucial component of his masculine persona, a feature that John Fried argues is characteristic of all of the film's male characters: "These men feel a compulsive need to speak, as if to articulate every detail of their thoughts and actions is to somehow gain control of them. To remain silent is, for them, to stop acting male, to let down their masculine guard or, more true to the paranoia, to be stripped of it" (7). That Vincent is literally *stripped* of his masculine guard is signaled by the deterioration of the character's costume: his neat black suit, white shirt and tie—standard issue hit-man threads—first become disheveled in the frantic revival of Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman); his clothing is then soiled beyond repair by the blood and brain matter of a criminal accomplice, killed as a

1. On the "hard body" as a symbol of Reaganite philosophies, politics, and economics, see Susan Jeffords (24–25).

result of Vincent's own professional incompetence; finally, his corpulent body becomes an object of ridicule as he is forced literally to strip naked and don the antithesis of the gangster's uniform—California beach-volleyball wear.

Pulp Fiction traces the progressive disintegration of Vincent's gangster persona and describes the character's narrative arc in terms of an increasing loss of control that evenuates in his death, again a result of his own incompetence. However, this death is deeply embedded within a complex narrative structure that reorganizes the story's temporal order. As a result, the film achieves closure (as they say) with a scene, featuring Vincent and Jules, that *precedes* the former's death in story time. *Pulp Fiction* ends with Vincent's resurrection, so to speak. This narrative "resurrection" is not unrelated to Tarantino's stated intentions with regard to Travolta's performance in the film. Indeed, Sharon Willis has suggested that *Pulp Fiction* constitutes an attempt, consonant with the recent widespread reappropriation of '70s popular culture, to recycle the cultural detritus of its *auteur's* childhood years, and in particular to redeem the star status of John Travolta. However, while Tarantino characteristically positions himself as the champion of rejected and/or devalued images, styles, and discourses, he has justified his rehabilitation of Travolta *not* by citing the overlooked cultural value of the star's early popular persona, but rather in virtue of Travolta's long neglected abilities as an *actor*. Tarantino seems to conceive of Travolta's career as a progressive squandering of artistic promise,² and *Pulp Fiction* attempts to inject the faded star with a little postmodern cultural capital.

Pulp Fiction (1994)



However, the historical devaluation of Travolta's 70s star image—i.e., the Reagan-era repudiation of disco culture and its male avatar³—is an obstacle to the realization of the writer/director's project. Tarantino's solution to this problem exemplifies a certain "ironic" approach to the cultural past: Martin Amis calls Travolta's turn as Vincent Vega a "travesty" of the early persona, but it is more properly a dehistoricization and a divestment. When Amis suggests "that John Travolta is so iconic that he ought to be dead" (212) he is, of course, referring to the image of the young Travolta. As far as the early Travolta persona is concerned, Tarantino would likely agree with Amis. Indeed, rather than illustrate diminished masculine competence, the "twist contest" scene in fact dramatizes Travolta's relinquishment of his 70s image. In Jack Rabbit Slim's, the dead-50s-star theme diner, the early Travolta image can be shorn of its historical meanings and converted into another unthreatening commodity of the nostalgia industry, displayed alongside the restaurant's other simulated icons (Ed Sullivan, James Dean, Ricky Nelson, Buddy Holly and Marilyn Monroe); this sequence, more than any other in the film, enables Travolta's transformation from an eroticized object (an icon since devalued) to an acclaimed and serious actor.

The notion of performance articulated in *Pulp Fiction* is even more insistently thematized in *Get Shorty* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1995). The latter film features Travolta as Chili Palmer, a *cinophilic* loan shark whose gangster persona is carefully modeled upon famous tough guys from film history. However, whereas for Vincent in *Pulp Fiction* the performative nature of gangster masculinity ultimately produces anxiety over competence and a total loss of control, for Chili performance is something that can be masterfully manipulated. Or, as becomes increasingly clear throughout the film, performance can be rejected altogether, since beneath the performative shell of the masculine Chili actually possesses a *natural, stable, and active* male self.

As an ironic genre hybrid, a cross between the gangster film and the satirical Hollywood-movie-about-Hollywood, *Get Shorty* repeatedly foregrounds its generic knowingness, mostly through exaggeratedly parodic versions of familiar character types. Amid the caricatured renditions of multi-cultural mobsters and fast-talking producers, Travolta's performance as Chili is anchored by a comparative naturalism: when Chili alludes to Cagney or De Niro, when he paraphrases notorious lines of dialogue from *The Godfather*, at least he's *aware* that he's acting a part.⁴ Indeed, in a film whose central conceit is that most *everybody* is playing a role, Chili is the only (male) character privileged with something approaching the aura of authenticity.

Nevertheless, *Get Shorty* repeatedly, if ambivalently, associates Chili with performance. In a sense, the film seems per-



petually to reiterate the question: Is Chili, or is he not, an actor? Upon first arriving in Hollywood to collect on a loan, Chili is (mistakenly) identified, by B-movie producer Harry Zimm (Gene Hackman), as an auditioning actor. Ironically, Zimm is *relieved* to find out that Chili is actually a loan shark: for Zimm, an actor represents a form of unstable and duplicitous subjectivity, while a criminal, by contrast, is presumed straightforward in his intentions. Chili himself invokes this opposition—between acting and what might be called *pure criminal honesty*⁵—to distinguish himself from the dissemblers of the movie business: “That’s the difference between you and me,” he tells Zimm. “I say what I mean. If I want something from someone, I ask them straight out.” However, Chili’s tendency to approach each of his confrontations as though it were a theatrical performance (or a scene in a movie!) is noticed by Karen Flores (Rene Russo),⁶ a privileged figure of honesty among the film’s mendacious males. It is Karen who articulates the ostensible truism of *Get Shorty* when she tells Chili that “I think you could be an actor. I know you’re acting sometimes, but you don’t show it.” Karen’s statement implies both that Chili retains an authentic form of (male) subjectivity (because Chili is only acting *sometimes*, at other times he presumably simply exists as his natural self) and that he is playing a part. Moreover, given that contemporary discourses on acting tend to applaud the performer who, to quote Karen, “do[es]n’t show it,” Chili is here represented as a particularly accomplished naturalistic actor.

This dichotomy within Chili also helps structure the film’s figuration of masculinities. Indeed, the male characters of *Get Shorty* are in a way ranked according to their performance abilities. As Karen implies, Chili is at the top of this hierarchy: his repeated command, “Look at me,” directed at both

his diegetic interlocutor and the film’s spectator, draws attention to his virtuoso performance, to the repertoire of distinctive gestures—the penetrating stare, the style of cigarette smoking, the confident strut, the habitual slight adjustment of the neck—that signifies the charismatic gangster. That Harry Zimm is brutally beaten (by the film’s *other* East Coast gangster, Ray “Bones” Barboni [Dennis Farina]) when he attempts to appropriate Chili’s distinctive imperative (“Look at me!”), indicates his (Zimm’s) inability to perform persuasively this masculine role. Similarly, the ignominious ends suffered by partners-in-crime Ronnie (Jon Gries) and Bo (Delroy Lindo) are to some extent brought about because the two are such *inept actors*.⁷ And as if to underscore even fur-

2. Here is Travolta paraphrasing Tarantino (on Travolta): “...Quentin let me have it. He said, ‘What did you *do*? Don’t you remember what Pauline Kael said about you? What Truffaut said about you? Don’t you know what you *mean* to the American cinema? John, what did you *do*? I was hurt—but moved. He was telling me I’d had a promise like no one else’s. I...thought, Jesus Christ, I must have been a fucking good actor” (Amis 212).

3. Willis describes Travolta as one among a number of “movie versions of ruined masculinity in search of rehabilitation” (46) within the Tarantino canon. It is of course not farfetched to understand the “ruin” of Travolta’s masculinity as a result of its association with the “ambiguous sexuality and androgyny of seventies disco culture” (Yanc 39). For a brief but insightful account of the ‘80s “Disco Backlash” and its relation to homophobia, sexism, and racism, see Yanc (47–48).

4. The character’s *cinophilia* motivates his absurdly precise references to the tough-guy movie persona, as when Chili describes his stolen coat as “a black leather jacket, fingertip length, like the one [on] Pacino in *Serpico*.”

5. The film makes sure we don’t miss the paradoxical quality of this formulation, as when a wronged wife, consoled by Chili, coos: “I trust you, Chili. I think you’re a decent type of man, even if you are a crook.”

6. In light of his ultimate assumption of the film producer/maker role, Chili’s concern with performance might more accurately be read as symptomatic of his desire to *direct*, to control the *mise-en-scene*, as when he repeatedly attempts to organize not just a scene’s dialogue and figure position and movement, but also its lighting, set design and prop placement.

ther the flamboyance of his *overacting*, the comic downfall of Ray "Bones" is played out in the film's movie-within-a-movie denouement.

Get Shorty clearly promotes Chili as a *better actor* than these vanquished male characters. However, Chili is much differently positioned in relation to Martin Weir (Danny DeVito), the one *professional actor* within the diegesis. Indeed, the kind of masculinity that Chili embodies becomes most evident in his juxtaposition with Weir. As a movie star whose persona emphasizes his status as a serious thespian, Weir practices a Method-like acting style that makes his embodiment of a role appear "natural"; that is, he acts so well as to efface the performance element from his performance. However, as Chili's admiring remarks ("If I didn't know better, I'd've thought you was a made guy. I mean, no acting there, right?") suggest, acting that is so "natural" that the performance element is apparently elided is invariably noticed and appreciated as "good" acting, as a premeditated and constructed effect; indeed, Weir prides himself not on *being* the character he portrays but rather on the construction of a convincing simulation.

While Chili's *cinophilia* indicates his respect for the art of "good" acting, for him simulation is something he enjoys watching, something within the realm of "play" or, as he calls it, "pretend," but not something that he engages in himself. To demonstrate this to Weir, Chili challenges the actor to

portray a cold, competent loan shark (a "Shylock"). Chili's command—"Martin, look at me"—is here not meant to cast himself as the to-be-looked-at object; rather, it is an assertion of the authority of *his own gaze*: "No, look at me the way I'm looking at you." For whereas Weir enacts a mere facsimile of the masterful male whose gaze renders the "other" an object, Chili *really is* that dominant figure. In this scene with Weir, the centre of *Get Shorty*'s discourse on performance, the film suggests that Chili is *not* an actor, that he is an authentic male subject and the bearer of the look.⁸ In the end, Chili's essential masculinity—stable, active, confident—dovetails neatly with one of the film's more glib notions—that the movie business is altogether not too different from the criminal underworld—when the character's gangster business tactics render him a success as a Hollywood producer, further suggesting that the same core qualities ensure male competence across any and all social contexts.

Travolta as the "Sincere" Male

A recurrent feature of the publicity texts that helped secure Travolta's comeback is the implication that the actor's current appeal is due, at least in part, to his successful reconciliation of the "specialness/ordinariness" dialectic that Richard Dyer has suggested is a vital component of the star phenomenon. Indeed, the depiction of Travolta's publicly available private life depends especially on the "special/ordinary" opposition:



Michael (1996)

the star is represented as both the pilot of his own private airplanes and the normal family man recovering from career setbacks; he can be described, seemingly without contradiction, as both “a millionaire who lives like a billionaire” (Amis 212) and as “a regular guy—one of us” (qtd. in Junod 184). In addition to its use by the publicity apparatus, the “special/ordinary” dialectic is also mobilized in *Phenomenon* (Jon Turteltaub, 1996) and *Michael* (Nora Ephron, 1996), two films whose lack of irony and “sanctimonious pursuit of lost purity” (Collins “Genericity” 243) make them examples of the ‘90s “new sincerity” that Jim Collins argues is the antithesis and complement to the postmodern genre film.⁹

Conservative generic hybrids with seemingly little in common beyond their star and their immodest commercial success,¹⁰ *Phenomenon* and *Michael* in fact share crucial features of theme and narrative structure. Thematically the two are linked by the centrality of the “special/ordinary” dialectic, embodied by Travolta. Moreover, in each film the dramatic possibilities of this opposition are realized through a remarkably similar narrative trajectory, in which the Travolta character, coded initially as “ordinary,” undergoes some kind of transformation which effects his refiguration as “special.”

Furthermore, generically *Phenomenon* and *Michael* are not so dissimilar as first supposed. Indeed, both films are to a certain extent variations on the 90s male-centered melodrama as it is characterized by Viveca Gretton and Tom Orman. That is, both films feature narratives in which the central male character’s process of transfiguration, effected by (super)natural and incurable disease, is meant to bring about a renovation of masculinity at the same time as it reasserts dominant values. However, whereas in the early-90s melodrama the film’s male star tends to portray a “repressive, manipulative, uncaring” (Gretton and Orman 115) figure whose emotional, ethical, and spiritual metamorphosis is the narrative’s central project,¹¹ in *Phenomenon* and *Michael* Travolta portrays a character whose very “ordinariness” is distinguished by an honest, sensitive, and non-oppressive form of masculinity. For Travolta illness and affliction serve not as narrative devices to motivate the character’s repairment of his masculinity, but rather as undeserved yet self-accepted physical deterioration that ensures the character’s authority—significantly, in matters emotional, ethical, and spiritual—in relation to those unaffected others less “enlightened” than himself.

The male affliction thematic is most apparent in *Phenomenon*, which traces the transformation of George Malley (Travolta) from “ordinary” (in the honest and non-oppressive sense noted above) to a condition of “specialness” so extreme that it functions as a metaphor for the unlimited potential of the human spirit. Initially the agent of George’s transformation is figured not as affliction but rather as a kind of supernatural intervention: after being exposed one night to a brilliant flash of light, George’s once-limited intellectual capacities begin rapidly to expand. In a small California town distinguished above all by the complete absence of social conflicts,¹² George’s newfound abilities—including, eventually, telekinesis and extrasensory perception—quickly become suspect. Indeed, even before George is diagnosed, by the

7. In a confrontation with Ray “Bones,” Ronnie assumes a classic Western hero showdown pose, with his gun tucked into the belt of his jeans. Ray chuckles, refers sarcastically to Ronnie as a “quick-draw artist,” and then blows him away. Bo is killed when a scene he has staged is sabotaged by a disgruntled actor, the stuntman named Bear.

8. The extratextual irony of this idea is that it is precisely John Travolta’s skill as an actor—legitimized by a Best Actor Oscar nomination (for *Pulp Fiction*)—that enables him to portray a character whose masculinity is defined as *not performative*.

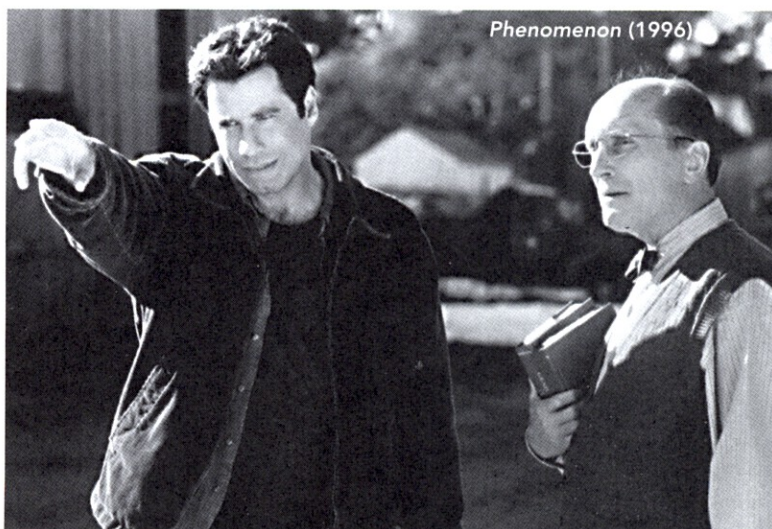
9. (itself epitomized by *Pulp Fiction* or *Get Shorty*)

10. *Phenomenon* is a small-town drama jump-started by a nebulous science-fictional premise characteristic of a TV movie. *Michael* is a romantic-comedy-on-the-road film imbricated with an angel-come-to-earth motif.

11. See, for instance, Harrison Ford in *Regarding Henry* (Mike Nichols, 1991) and William Hurt in *The Doctor* (Randa Haines, 1991).

12. Both *Michael* and *Phenomenon* take place predominantly in rural settings whose inherent goodness is defined against a corrupt (urban) society (in *Michael*, the cutthroat capitalism of Chicago; in *Phenomenon*, the arrogance and manipulation of the military/industrial complex). Even within the idealized rural setting, George is an exemplary figure: a model of egalitarian integrity, George’s closest friends include a younger black man (Forest Whitaker), a Latino coeval (Tony Genaro), and an older male father-figure (Robert Duvall as “Doc”). Moreover, class conflict is also reconciled within George—he is a hard-working mechanic who makes no distinctions between himself and his co-workers, despite the fact that he is the owner of the garage (and his co-workers are thus also his employees).

13. From a progressive political perspective, George’s use of his moral authority is typically problematic, as when he facilitates the heterosexual union between his friend Nate (Whitaker) and an attractive young emigrant from Brazil (Elisabeth Nunziato)—that these characters represent the only two unmarried racial/ethnic “others” on the diegetic landscape presumably (and, for the film, embarrassingly) justifies their union as eminently “right” and “natural.”



medical/military establishment, with a rare brain tumor, his condition is considered an affliction by most of the townspeople, whose incomprehension and fear of this "phenomenon" make George into an unassimilable "other." Of course, the film's sympathies are clearly with George, and the juxtaposition of his spectacularly developing powers with the suffering engendered by his social isolation confers upon him the kind of moral authority that is the characteristic privilege of the afflicted male in the melodramas cited by Gretton and Orman.¹³ And while George's metamorphosis at first inspires in him an insatiable intellectual curiosity and a concomitant desire for contact with others who share his cerebral passions, the film swiftly discredits this course of action (Berkeley scientists are revealed to be the dupes of federal intelligence agencies) and suggests that what George really needs is the love and support of a good wife and family. Indeed, by the time his condition has been certified as a fatal disease, the film has expended much effort to suggest that though George may be "special," his specialness is merely an extension of the "ordinary": George characterizes himself as "what everyone can be...the possibility...[of] the human spirit." Thus it is no surprise that the apotheosis of George comes not with the fulfillment of one of his ambitious intellectual projects, but rather in terms of something far more commonplace: his assumption of the role of husband/father (to pretty divorcee Lace [Kyra Sedgwick] and her two children). It is the nuclear family—the epitome of the "ordinary"—that is finally affirmed in *Phenomenon*. Indeed, that "a man ought to be with his family" is the idea whose basic truth is further legitimized by the pathos of George's death, and it is also the one notion that all of the film's characters—from hardened federal agents to ignorant small-town barflies—seem unequivocally to endorse.

Like *Phenomenon*, *Michael* too exploits the "specialness/ordinariness" antinomy. Indeed, Michael (Travolta) is both a feather-winged archangel, practiced in the art of benign intervention, and a resolutely "regular" guy, a cheerful, middle-aged white male who avidly consumes cigarettes and junk food while discoursing on the joys of heterosexual fornication and hand-to-hand combat. Furthermore, the film initially suggests that what makes Michael "special" is also what makes him "ordinary"; that is, Michael is distinguished from the film's other characters *not* by his divine provenance but rather by his simplicity, his celebration of the quotidian, and his profound appreciation of material experience. Transtextually Michael shares these qualities with the angel Daniel in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987), a film which, like *Michael* and the male melodramas of the early '90s, also links "the desirability of becoming (like) children again" (Modleski 104) with a "rethinking [of] what it means to be a man" (Modleski 105).

However, unlike in *Wings of Desire* or even *Phenomenon*, in *Michael* the film's male star is the agent, rather than the object, of transformation: indeed, it's the cynical tabloid journalist Frank Quinlan (William Hurt) whose masculinity must be renovated, a narrative project that Michael describes (tritely) as "giv[ing] a man back his heart." Accordingly,

Michael's figuration as a particularly ingenuous adolescent is not so much a model for Frank (or the film's other characters) to emulate as a privileged position from which Michael's promotion of normative values derives its legitimacy. Structured as a road journey across the heartland of America, *Michael* consists of a series of "educational" episodes in which the angel-child-man "instructs in the 'basic truths' concerning family, love and work" (Gretton and Orman 117).¹⁴

However, while *Michael* clearly endorses the notion of "liberation" as a recovery of "latent innocence" (Gretton and Orman 115)—often simply by offering its central character as proof of the concept's intrinsic worth—the film nonetheless withholds unequivocal ethical authority from Michael until the revelation of his affliction. Michael's illness, a condition of bodily deterioration that signals the end of the angel's allotted time as a goodwill guide on earth, confers upon him a redoubtable authority, at the same time as his apparent acceptance of contingency and mortality—of his imminent "death"—seems to qualify the desire for male regression for which he has previously served as an emblem.

Thus it is ultimately Michael's affliction, and the pathos of his powerless body, that renders him "special" and ensures that his "education" of the film's other characters will be effective. Indeed, the memory of Michael—and the normative values he espoused—inspires Frank's principled denunciation of his crude capitalist boss, Vartan Malt (Bob Hoskins), an act which, along with Frank's subsequent resignation, is affirmed by the film as a decisive step in the renovation of his masculinity. Moreover, Michael's posthumous influence extends eventually to the reconstitution of the heterosexual couple. In the film's apparent conclusion, Frank and Dorothy (Andie MacDowell) are reunited, an event which both completes Michael's stated mission and justifies his "death" as a kind of successful sacrifice.

However, the spectator's subsequent realization that Michael is *not* "dead," that he is still active in this diegetic world (albeit hidden out of sight from the other main characters), crucially alters the film's discourse on the acceptance of mortality and affirms its conception of the desirability of male regression. Indeed, Michael's affliction is revealed to be a kind of adolescent prank, an elaborate ruse that facilitates a conventional narrative resolution. Given the kind of stylistic bombast used to convey the pathos of Michael's "death," this cynical bit of plot manipulation ought to register as a betrayal of the film's vaunted "sincerity." Of course, the indisputable "rightness" and "naturalness" of Michael's ultimate project—the formation of the heterosexual couple—justifies the deception; moreover, the character and the cluster of values that he endorses are likely only further strengthened—rather than compromised—by the reappearance of the film's star¹⁵ and his authorization of a reassuring denouement. In the end, *Michael* not only succeeds in reconciling the "special/ordinary" dialectic within the body of its male star, but it also convincingly transforms Travolta into a good-natured guardian of patriarchal romance and the architect of institutionalized heterosexual monogamy—for as Michael himself cheerfully boasts: "I invented mar-



Face/Off (1997)

riage. Before that, everybody was so mixed up they didn't know what to do. So I said: 'Have a ceremony.'"

Performing the Villain: Travolta and John Woo

While I largely concur with Tony Williams's assessment of *Broken Arrow* (John Woo, 1996) as "run-of-the-mill action exploitation" and "an over-budgeted special effects text" (41), it seems to me worth pointing to a few interesting and relevant features of a film in which Travolta gets to enact a "villainous inversion" (Dyer 55) of the sympathetic protagonists he has previously portrayed.

First, Travolta's turn as Deakins, the film's "villain," appears to justify the actor's affected performance style: indeed, Travolta's facial expressions, mannerisms, and maniacal laugh, underscored by a recurrent musical motif, together function as a willful exaggeration of the typical action film "bad guy." Apparently, performing the villain authorizes the

14. Similar to the male melodramas cited by Gretton and Orman, *Michael* especially uses "[m]usic, the *melos* of melodrama,...[as] part of a larger scheme of articulation... related to the recollection of value" (117). Indeed, several of the film's poignant scenes of "ethical instruction" are associated with musical and dance performances, while Michael approvingly quotes pop tunes on the preciousness of love, and encourages group sing-alongs to recapture a lost (childlike) sense of spontaneous unity.

15. The logic here being that the audience of a "comedy" neither expects nor desires the film's most charismatic figure to die, and thus will gladly accept any narrative contrivance that facilitates the character's resurrection.



Broken Arrow (1996)

actor to treat his role as something of “a joke with [the] director allowing [the] star to *overact*” (Williams 46; italics mine). While I am not convinced that this strategy “creates an awareness of the character as a construction separate from the actor—who himself might be a simulation—and from concepts of unified male subjectivity” (Bingham 101), clearly it problematizes the notion of verisimilitude upon which the commercial realist cinema is founded.

Second, as Williams has suggested, the opening sequence of *Broken Arrow* is “promising” (41), insofar as it neatly adumbrates the conflict between the film’s two main characters by placing them within a boxing ring, a space which, as Frank Krutnik has argued, functions as “an enclosed arena of masculine performance, a site of contest between two skimpily-clad contenders who enact a ritualistic and idealised fantasy of masculine potency” (190). Furthermore, that the “doubling” imagery mobilized in this sequence—the use of editing, camera speed and angle, and figure position to link expressively the characters as “mirror” images of each other—is subsequently only erratically deployed indicates the extent to which the action genre’s demand for large-scale explosions precludes Woo’s characteristic concern for the fracturing of male subjectivity.

Third, as a maverick within the U.S. Air Force, Deakins is the kind of anti-bureaucratic tough guy who, in the 80s action cinema, functioned as a popular heroic figure whose defiance of dominant institutions was meant to represent “the will and desires of the ‘average’ citizen against the self-serving empowerment of government bureaucrats who are standing in the way of social improvement” (Jeffords 19). *Broken Arrow* suggests not only that this heroic model is obsolete, but invokes Deakins’s resentment at his depreciation as the motivation for his transformation into a “villain.”¹⁶ The film thus presents the action movie villain as a particular species of *angry white male*: Deakins shares rank with a soldier almost half his age (Christian Slater) and has clearly been bypassed on the promotional ladder; moreover, the position he feels he deserves—that of Colonel¹⁷—is occupied by a *black* man (Delroy Lindo) who, not incidentally, is killed rather perfunctorily in a helicopter crash that facilitates the Slater character’s climactic act of successful single-handed heroism.

The writing of this article has coincided with the release of *Face/Off* (1997), yet another immensely popular film starring Travolta, as well as the actor’s second collaboration with director Woo. While *Face/Off* is certainly a complex work that merits considered critical treatment, in the space left here I would just like to note briefly those features of the film that relate to my overall discussion of Travolta.

1. Masculinity as performance. In earlier Hong Kong films like *The Killer* (1989) and *Hard Boiled* (1992), Woo has gone out of his way to stress that his male characters—both tough cops and professional assassins—are necessarily performers, acting out socially and generically determined roles whose moral value is perpetually shifting. The central premise of *Face/Off* hyperbolizes this notion, with “supercop” Sean Archer/Travolta and master terrorist Castor Troy/Nicolas Cage literally trading faces. Moreover, the nar-

rative contrivance that enables Archer/Travolta to assume the physical appearance of Troy/Cage (and vice versa) initiates a discourse on masculinity as performance that operates on at least two significant levels.

On one level, each character must learn to act convincingly like his “temperamental as well as moral opposite” (Denby 47). Thus follows a series of juxtapositions—aided by frequent crosscutting between the two characters, not to mention some delirious play with editing and mirrors that reinforces the “double” motif—that initially serves to highlight those qualities that the two antagonists ostensibly share. Given that the safety of an entire city is dependent on how complete and convincing his performance is, and given the violence he must inflict and the physical torture he is forced to endure in his pursuit of verisimilitude, it is not surprising that Archer’s identity is clearly more destabilized than Troy’s—that the conventional “good” guy succumbs to the male anxiety that Dennis Bingham has argued accompanies the “fragmentation of the self into an array of roles” (219).¹⁸ By contrast, Troy’s villainous persona is so flamboyant, so obviously a performance, that his enactment of Archer is shown to entail not a naturalistic simulation, but merely a slight adjustment in his basic persona.¹⁹

Indeed, Troy’s flamboyance provides a neat segue into the film’s other significant level of performance, within which the Hollywood star/actor John Travolta performs as the Hollywood star/actor Nicolas Cage (and, again, vice versa). Of course, Travolta does not really attempt to mimic Cage’s performance of the Troy character. In fact, Travolta’s performance is characterized by many of the same gestures, expressions, and vocal inflections he employed in *Broken Arrow*. Indeed, *Face/Off* makes explicit the conception of the villain-as-performer that is only vaguely suggested by *Broken Arrow*. Travolta’s swagger, his leering smile, and his deliberate cruelty constitute an over-the-top parody of dominant heterosexual masculinity and its defining qualities (confidence, aggressiveness, sexual potency). That Travolta is made to embody both this villainous burlesque and the film’s redeemed paternal figure seems to me less a result of something inherent in his star persona and more a product of the film’s concern with the rehabilitation of the bourgeois father and the cultural order that he represents.

2. Fatherhood and the family. *Face/Off* opens with Troy/Cage’s murder of Archer/Travolta’s young son; a tragic side-effect of the botched assassination of his father, the boy’s death, whose pathos is amplified by stylistic excess (music, slow-motion, and over-exposed lighting), signals the violent disruption of the nuclear family whose repairment becomes the overarching *telos* of the narrative. Archer’s guilt over this incident provokes a crisis in male authority that manifests itself most clearly in the domestic sphere, where his visible pain and uncertainty translate into failed competence as a husband and father. At work Archer is humorless, methodical, and obsessed, his grim efficiency as a federal agent obviously compensation for his damaged paternal identity. That Troy/Travolta’s assumption of the Archer role—and of his quotidian responsibilities—is considered an *improvement* by

those closest to the character indicates the extent to which Archer is in need of renovation. And while Troy/Travolta is of course merely "acting" the part of passionate husband (to neglected wife Eve [Joan Allen]) and firm but understanding father (to rebellious teenage daughter Jamie), the point of his impersonation is not to underscore the illusiveness of the "happy nuclear family." Rather, *Face/Off* seems here to suggest that the husband/father role is itself sufficient to evoke noble patriarchal instincts in *any* man, given that the male figure assumes his position within the "right" family.

The "wrong" family in *Face/Off* is figured as a group of drug and arms dealers, centered around a single mother (whose son Castor Troy has unknowingly fathered, and abandoned) and her devoted brother. While the film's sympathy for this family increases in accordance with Sasha (Gina Gershon) and her brother's efforts on behalf of Archer/Cage—whom they presume is Troy—the characters' eventual elimination from the narrative—by violent death—signifies the unviability of their "alternative" to the nuclear configuration. Indeed, despite the fact that *Face/Off* seems to suggest that the opportunistic victimization of women is a trait common to empowered males of entirely opposite ethical allegiances—Archer/Travolta's threat to take away Sasha's son is less sensational, though more exemplary of systemic abuse, than Troy/Cage's casual murder of a female agent—Sasha's death, the sacrifice of her independent subjectivity, serves ultimately to reaffirm the value of patriarchal norms. Inspired by the vision of renewed paternal responsibility enacted in Archer/Cage's impersonation of Troy, Sasha inserts herself into the arena of male conflict, displacing Eve in the line of fire: the film's single mother and sexualized "bad" female literally takes the bullet on behalf of the "good," bourgeois married woman. Moreover, Sasha's dying request for her son not to be "like us"—criminals like herself and Troy—is fulfilled when in the film's epilogue the boy becomes integrated with the "normal" bourgeois Archer family. Thus at *Face/Off*'s end not only is the heroic father figure redeemed²⁰ and the supervening cause of the family's breakdown (Castor Troy) successfully eliminated, but the nuclear family is explicitly endorsed by the female character upon whose exclusion its reconstitution is predicated. For a film whose concern with the fragmentation of masculinity at times borders on the obsessive, female subjectivity is ultimately revealed as the threat whose containment (by way of narrative expulsion) enables the realization of the fantasy of male potency: as the reconstructive surgeon finally assures Archer: "When you wake up—everything will be restored."

Conclusion

Although the film roles that encompass Travolta's comeback do not quite fashion for the star a coherent new persona (i.e., an image with identifiable features whose operation can be detected across multiple fictional incarnations), I hope I have been able to point out a few elements that are constitutive of Travolta's new image and which recurrently inflect the characters that he portrays. Chief among these is an "ironic" acting style that insinuates itself into a spectrum of generic and

social types—from the "cool" gangster to the "ordinary" middle-American and the flamboyant villain—and which, while it clearly does not violate the canons of Hollywood verisimilitude, nonetheless calls attention to the performance element in Travolta's various roles. Another significant feature of the star's past meanings: the accumulated associations of the early image, as well as the stigma of popular rejection, seem to have been effectively neutralized (again, often with the help of protective "irony"), if not entirely effaced. Indeed, Travolta's new dramatic persona is partially defined by its fluidity, by its ability to incorporate a multiplicity of identities—certainly the star is no longer bound to the iconic image which conjoined his youthful masculinity with a distinctive cultural moment. Travolta's recent films are distinguished by his performance of a *range* of roles, a range that is itself perhaps well within the dominant culture's limits of acceptable male representation, but which also evinces those anxieties and tensions that the maintenance of normative heterosexual masculinity so often engenders.

16. Admittedly, the depiction of Deakins as increasingly insane—a hallmark of the genre—tends to obscure the initial source of his discontent.

17. Hale (Slater) on Deakins: "You said so yourself you should have made Colonel by now, but you're too busy pushing at everybody all the time."

18. A point neatly suggested by Archer/Cage's exhausted/elated declaration, following a prison brawl: "I'm Castor Troy. I'm Castor Troy. I'M Castor Troy!"

19. Troy's narcissistic passion for his own persona makes him resent those distinctive features of the "other" that he is forced to wear: "This hair, this nose, this ridiculous chin." Again by contrast, Archer's performance of Troy is distinguished by the careful duplication of his nemesis's characteristic gestures and vocal ties. Indeed, Archer is depicted as having undergone a Method-like program of research and study in preparation for his role—he has, as a supporting character puts it, "lived and breathed Castor Troy for years."

20. Rendered symbolically by the surgical effacement of Archer's scar, the bullet-shaped "reminder" of his paternal failure.

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Performance and the Still Photograph: **Marilyn Monroe**

By **Florence Jacobowitz** and **Richard Lippe**



Publicity shot for *The Prince and the Showgirl*. Photo: Richard Avedon

She knew she was superlative at creating still pictures and she loved doing it. She didn't have to learn lines as she did for her movies, she could let her imagination range freely without concern about consistency or continuity, she could be a different Marilyn for each photographer or each frame of film. It was always her party and often there would be champagne and music, but always total attention. It was she who in essence was saying, "Let's make a Marilyn."

—Eve Arnold

OF ALL THE FILM STARS, MARILYN MONROE WAS, perhaps, the most photographed. Her image remains potent long after her death, circulating through a steady proliferation of still images marketed as books, posters, photographs, advertisements. The May/June 1997 issue of *American Photo*, billed a "collector's issue" and "a tribute to America's Ultimate Icon" offers "rare," "never-seen" photographs taken by a variety of photographers. Arguably, Monroe's persona is more identified with the still image than it is with the films she made. For instance, *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) is better known for the photographic images of Monroe in a white halter dress, standing over a subway grate, enjoying the blast of air blowing up her dress, conveying a sense of narcissistic, exhibitionistic pleasure, than it is as a narrative film.¹ It isn't because her film work is insignificant. Her star persona was fed by a number of components—her talent as an actor, her voice and ability as a singer, her sense of timing and understanding of performance—all central to what defines the image.

Marilyn Monroe's career as a photographer's model was ongoing from 1946 until her death. She began as a model, but became a working collaborator in the construction of her photographs; she was an artist who was well aware of the process of constructing the acclaimed 'magic' rapport she had with the camera. That expertise, knowledge and professionalism were the key to the extraordinary success of so many of her photographs, taken by a wide range of photographers. Monroe worked with some of the great photographers of the 20th Century, including Alfred Eisenstadt, Richard Avedon, Philippe Halsman, Eve Arnold, Milton H. Greene, Cecil Beaton, Bert Stern, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Elliot Erwitt as well as lesser-known talents whose reputations were enhanced through their association with Monroe. She was also photographed by studio glamour photographers such as Frank Powolny and Gene Korman who contributed to establishing Monroe's recognizable iconicity; Twentieth Century-Fox, capitalizing on the familiarity of the visual aspects of her persona, promoted these images in conjunction with her film



The Seven Year Itch: Monroe performs for the photographers.

career. However, Monroe's well-known photographic images extend far beyond the studio's marketing complex. Monroe sought out favored artists like Eve Arnold with whom she worked regularly on photographic shoots/sessions over a number of years. An extraordinary historical moment deserving mention took place on the set of *The Misfits* (1961): a number of the prestigious Paris-based Magnum group of photojournalists were hired as a rotating group of photographers (including Eve Arnold) on a well-publicized assignment to shoot informal and set stills. (The film, directed by John Huston, features, in addition to Monroe, Clark Gable and Montgomery Clift, two actors who are in their own right highly iconic figures).

We are focusing on *Marilyn Monroe: An Appreciation* by Eve Arnold for a number of reasons², partly because of the significance of the imagery and also because Arnold was the only woman photographer to shoot Monroe on an ongoing basis. Interestingly, Monroe, who is male-identified in so many aspects of her personal and professional life, worked with a number of key women professionals; aside from her longstanding collaborative relationship with Eve Arnold, she formed partnerships with two drama coaches, first Natasha Lytess, later Paula Strasberg. Unlike the dubiously productive and highly controversial relationships between Monroe and these women, the one with Arnold was clearly creative and

1. As many critics have noted, Monroe often played a performer of some sort in her films. In *The Seven Year Itch*, she is a television and photographer's model who is identified only as 'The Girl'.

2. Eve Arnold, *Marilyn Monroe: An Appreciation* (New York, Viking Press, 1987).

fruitful. Judging from Eve Arnold's comments from her book on Monroe, it seems that she liked and respected Monroe and found her a strong collaborator.³ Arnold's sessions with other major female stars, Marlene Dietrich in the early 50s and Joan Crawford later in the decade, produced a series of fascinating photographs. Arnold claims Monroe's proposal that they work together was based on her favorable response to the Dietrich session. What these sessions share is a contemplation of the construction/deconstruction of the star image in working situations (rather than emphasizing the perfected studio image). The emphasis in Arnold's work is on the process of shaping the image. They also reveal a non-exploitive intimacy often absent in photographs of this kind. The session with Dietrich is particularly notable for its informality, unusual for Dietrich who only allowed heavily worked-over glamour shots that she approved to be released to the press. The other striking feature of all the sessions is a photojournalistic approach that combines spontaneity with a sense of formal construction and the presentation of a dramatic moment which has narrative-like aspects to it.⁴

It was a bit tedious to listen to her tell about how happy and inspired she had been during the months when she made that series of photographs with Richard Avedon. The series was, indeed, remarkable; they were pictures of her made up to impersonate all the big stars of the thirties. But listening to her, you'd believe the only satisfaction as an actress she had ever felt was during those disguises, when she suddenly turned into Marlene, Garbo and Harlow. She talked about these photography sessions the way other actors talk about their films. She seemed to have no other happy professional memories.

—Simone Signoret, quoted by Eve Arnold

What is often overlooked and therefore unacknowledged, in addition to the subject's active collaboration in the process of creating an image, is the activity of performance within the photograph.⁵ Performance in regard to Monroe and still photography takes on specific meaning. The comment that Arnold suggests sums up Monroe's attitude, "Let's make a Marilyn", captures the spirit of her acting for the still camera. Monroe consistently created a persona, identified as 'Marilyn Monroe'. Within the borders of this construct are a series of variations and narrative moments which can be attributed to the actress performing for the camera, in a manner not unlike a so-called 'naturalised' Method performance. In many respects the appearance of spontaneity associated with the style of photojournalism communicates the illusion of verisimilitude. The still photograph, as Arnold notes, offered Monroe a degree of freedom, hence control, denied her in a performance for the moving camera which was limited by a variety of factors: the script, the director's conception of the character and performance, post-production editing decisions, the studio's control of the star's image. Through the still photograph, Monroe was able to develop a more complex identity than onscreen.⁶

The difficulty of mapping out clear distinctions between

the performer and the person can be complicated by a number of issues, not least the notion of Hollywood film acting styles and the photojournalistic aspect of many star photographs in circulation. These concerns are equally valid in relation to the still photograph and onscreen identity. For instance, how much of Cary Grant's star presence, on and off the screen, is drawn from a pre-existing construction composed of a personal identity and a persona which is an amalgam of characterizations and connotations?

In regard to Marilyn Monroe, the period in which her image receives the extraordinary amount of publicity and press coverage it does is one of transition, marked by the collapse of the studio system, the relaxation of censorship both within Hollywood and society at large, the nascent creation of a new market in the tabloid press through the appearance of scandal/exposé magazines such as *Confidential* and the emergence of the pseudo-respectable girlie magazine with *Playboy* (whose first cover Monroe adorned).⁷ Monroe is one of the first major film stars to be cultivated and marketed as a celebrity who is larger than the sum of her onscreen roles. Her life was appropriated and devoured by the press and to a large extent she collaborated with its public exposure. This is also in part a result of the breakdown of the studio system and their control over a star's image through a tightly organized department of publicity and promotion. Monroe contributed to the accessibility of her persona through her own publicity machine which, on the one hand, allowed a degree of personal input but also opened up a network which was not easily controlled or contained. Nevertheless, despite this she survived a proliferation of potential scandals through a combination of her direct, open approach, her innate awareness of the workings of the media, a willingness to share intimacies and confide in her public and the vulnerability associated with her persona. This was true of a variety of well-publicized incidents ranging from the nude calendar exposé, the professional battles with Twentieth Century-Fox over the roles assigned and her salary, her marriages and miscarriages, the staging of her sexuality through incidents like that of the notorious subway grating photographic session on the set of *The Seven Year Itch*.

All of the abovementioned changes in the way a star's persona is circulated led to a transformation in the creation and maintenance of celebrity status in evidence still today. Monroe's demand to construct her own image in contradistinction to the studio-formed, type-based persona leads to a more complicated, individualized and self-expressive persona. While the persona remains in part designed and constructed, it is more open to the vagaries of social and cultural discourse.

Monroe's persona, highly publicized through her photographs and the media's reporting of her life story, encouraged an illusion of intimacy between the star and her public. The Marilyn persona is characterized by intimacy, accessibility, an open, privileged giving to her fans. Additionally, Monroe's life eclipses a 'Hollywood' melodramatic narrative. The biographical details, fictionalized or not, are well-known: Norma Jean's humble roots, her mother's mental disorder and the young girl's foster home upbringing, an early

marriage and working as a photographer's model while still in her teens and being promoted initially in her career as an image of naturalness, health, innocence, the all-American girl. Monroe's image later became increasingly sexualized through her calendar/pinup shots, before her film career began to take off. From the early fifties onward the onscreen roles and offscreen images intensify the familiar iconic aspects of the star—the platinum-white wavy, tousled hair, the curvy, cleavage body, the sewn-into-her-dress wardrobe, the full red lips, the visual dramatization of a seduction, a sexual fantasy which is equally playful and self-aware.⁸ As the visual image circulates and takes on prominence, Monroe's personal life is broadcast to the public and is as spectacular as her visual look. The professional confrontations with Twentieth Century-Fox for more serious acting roles, resulting in the founding of her own independent production company with Milton H. Greene, one of her most famous photographers/collaborators⁹; the succession of lovers/husbands who represented a cross-section of ideal American males—Joe DiMaggio, baseball player/world famous celebrity, Arthur Miller, an East coast playwright, member of the cultural intelligentsia, Yves Montand, the continental lover/ internationally known performer, the Kennedy brothers/ political celebrities: all these were highly publicized media events. During the latter part of her career, Monroe's co-stars become increasingly prestigious, including Laurence Olivier, Clark Gable and Montgomery Clift, actors whose status served to endorse her aspirations to be taken as a serious performer.

Monroe's personal and professional existence became a highly dramatic narrative which was continuously profiled in the press and unfolded in a compressed, tumultuous, brief number of years. In an approximately ten-year period, Monroe moves from near obscurity through a rocket-like ascendance to her dramatic decline and death. The photographs taken throughout her career play with narrativity across a broad spectrum, drawing from the material of her media-charged life.

The circulation of her image depended upon Monroe's willingness to participate in her own exposure and communicated an appealing, almost childlike lack of inhibition. In part Monroe's playfulness reflects the celebratory attitude of post-war rejuvenation, consumerist comfort and America's liberal image of confidence and well-being. The image of Monroe's dress blowing upwards over the subway grate not only functions to expose the body as cheesecake but also acknowledges a sense of daring, and flaunts conventions and conservative mores. It speaks to the aspects of her image which are intrin-



The iconic Marilyn,
20th Century Fox Studio publicity still

sically related to fun, to simple enjoyment and play. Monroe's seductiveness is, in part, rooted in a seeming delight in her own physicality, which is often self-directed. Nevertheless,

3. Interestingly, Eve Arnold manages to avoid the reduction of an image into 'camp' which often accompanies iconic imagery. Arnold's images reflect her respect for her subject and strongly differ from photographic images which empty the persona of meaning, which is what occurs with, for example, Andy Warhol's silkscreens.

4. In regard to Monroe still images, there were numerous outstanding collaborative relationships such as the Sam Shaw photographs which present and explore other aspects of the star's persona within informal, intimate settings. See Sam Shaw and Norman Rosten, *Marilyn among friends* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 1987).

5. In part, the still photograph lacks a crucial aspect of the Monroe persona: its identification with a distinctive voice—both in terms of aural sound, the breathy, child-like, sensual voice and speech, her witticisms and innuendos.

6. For example, an early attempt was made to cast Monroe in a serious dramatic role in *Don't Bother to Knock* (1952), where she played a disturbed babysitter. Judging by the lack of commercial and critical interest in Monroe in the film, the studio may have decided to push her career in another more commercially viable direction, emphasizing her sexual presence and talent as a performer in the musical and/or comedy direction.

7. For an insightful discussion of Marilyn Monroe and America in the 1950s see Richard Dyer, "Monroe and Sexuality", *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

8. Marilyn Monroe's distinctive persona inspired many imitations; the most serious competition in the 50s was Jayne Mansfield. However, unlike Monroe, Mansfield lacked the ability to communicate a complex personality and remained a sexualized, objectified presence. This becomes particularly evident when looking at Mansfield's still photographs which are singularly geared to exhibit her invariably exposed body.

9. Milton H. Greene's exceptional photographs are found in *Milton's Marilyn* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, Moss Runn, Ltd., 1994). The book contains both studio portraits and informal shots taken during the 1953-57 period.



Promotional poster for *The Misfits*, Marilyn Monroe presented as a sex symbol

this semblance of ease before the camera is deceptive; it is a construction, fortified by a style of performance that emphasizes verisimilitude, and the illusion of naturalness and accessibility. This appearance is framed by Monroe's fore-mentioned signature iconic look which is so highly designed through colour, shades of white punctuated by the brilliant red lips, tactile textures, the curvacious body. In her still image Monroe embodies the celebrity/star, at once a construct larger than life and a figure of identification, a variant of the all-American girl. This tension between extreme artifice and naturalness marks Monroe's professional work. The photographs are never simply candid and spontaneous; there is always present an underlying sense of a real person who is also an actor, aware of a performance.¹⁰

She is an actress, and her experiences can reappear at odd moments across the years. A particular photo can portray a mood she may have felt a decade earlier. Another will reveal anticipation of pleasures or sorrows to come.
—Norman Mailer, from *Marilyn*¹¹

Monroe's photographs are charged by the interplay of a professional artist aware of the formal demands of performing and yet able to express a degree of freedom and improvisation. On the one hand, as Eve Arnold stated, "the idea of the candid shot, the actress unaware, was impossible with her." On the other hand, the image of Marilyn Monroe is dependent upon the identity of an individual person whose moods changed and whose performances drew from genuine experiences. As Arnold says in the opening quotation of this article, as a subject for the still camera, Monroe maintained her professional skills as an actor, and could collaborate with the photographer creatively and imaginatively, without having to address the demands of a filmic characterization; Monroe's

expressivity was her contribution to their sessions. The two women's mutual respect and trust resulted in an ongoing collaboration which lasted from the early fifties through to the end of Monroe's career and her death in the early 60s. The Arnold/Monroe photographs reflect a shared professionalism: Arnold's strengths as a photojournalist and Monroe's ability as a performer who could improvise for the still camera are evident in their best collaborations. For this reason perhaps, Arnold's assignment through Magnum on the set of *The Misfits* produces a rich collection of work. While Arnold's images of Monroe are consistently strongly designed and constructed and are not meant to be read as candid shots, they still document a spontaneous moment, a revelatory one, offering insight into the Monroe persona. Many of the photographs illustrate Arnold's ability to perceive a dramatic moment and give it shape through her stylistic sensibility.¹²

Arnold's photographic style should be considered in relation to other post-war artistic and cultural movements which integrated artistic formalism with the spontaneity of documentary techniques, on-location shooting and the other conventions and aspects of a realist aesthetic. Although this argument extends beyond the scope of our discussion, one can see connections between the work of a photographer like Arnold (particularly her work for the Magnum group which had its origins in the photojournalism associated with magazines such as *Life*; significantly, Robert Capa founded Magnum in 1947) and the concerns of the New Wave in France, with its roots in Neo-realism, and other concurrent styles of performance in America such as Method acting which explored self-expression and naturalistic behavior.

Before commenting on Arnold's photo sessions with Monroe, it is important to consider Monroe's onscreen work in the 50s to better understand some of the tensions the star's image embodies. One of her key films is Howard Hawks's

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953). The role of Lorelei Lee utilizes the most heightened aspects of the Monroe persona and integrates this with the extraordinary sense of spontaneity expressed in Monroe's performance. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was Monroe's breakthrough film and it is a major musical comedy that is carried by Monroe and Jane Russell. Like other genres, the musical comedy is grounded in expectation and stereotype but humour and play are a means of negotiating its concerns in relation to stylization and naturalness.

Lorelei Lee is offset by Dorothy/Jane Russell who is a practical, level-headed, one-of-the-boys kind of gal. In contrast to Dorothy's image, Lorelei is a gold digger who uses her sexuality in a predatorial manner to empty innocent men of their money. The energy of the film is located both in its acknowledgement and usage of this stereotype and the celebration of women's pleasure which, in turn, empowers them. Monroe's presence in the film intensifies these issues in a non-threatening way. She calls attention to the image of the sexual blonde and takes the character in a direction only Monroe's persona could—toying with the concept of the 'dumb blonde', her Lorelei in effect announces "I am desirable", but she isn't interested in retribution or a heterosexual relationship—Lorelei is almost self-contained and is presented as a character who enjoys pleasure which is an end in itself. Lorelei's pleasure is centred on diamonds and her friendship with Dorothy, not heterosexual men. The film acknowledges the male world as an audience, as a source for lines of monetary credit, as a necessity with whom the female characters must interact. The musical numbers are the heart of the film and significantly they are either self-contained expressions of individual pleasure (Lorelei's "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend", Dorothy's "Anyone Here for Love"), or mutual pleasure contained in the women's friendship ("Two Little Girls From Little Rock" and "When Love Goes Wrong"). Hawks underlines the film's commitment to its female protagonists in the final recapitulation of "Two Little Girls From Little Rock" and the shared look between the women as they march down the aisle. (Interestingly, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is the only Monroe film that connects her collaboratively with another woman).

Much of what Monroe brought to Lorelei, transforming a conventional comedic stereotype into a creation which is vital and soars far beyond what might have been expected (the "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" number is one of the most extraordinary woman-centred spectacles in the Hollywood cinema), is present in many of the photographs Eve Arnold creates with Monroe. Arnold places Monroe in unexpected environments such as a children's playground. The location alludes to the childlike aspects of Monroe's identity which underlie the hyper-stylized creation—playfulness, innocence, naturalness—but without denying her sensual, adult presence. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* presents a stereotype—the blonde whose identity is iconographically stated in her visual appearance—but complicates the viewer's assessment of the type by foregrounding the character's awareness of social expectations and the whole question of pleasure: Whose pleasure? The male viewer's or Lorelei's?

Arnold also uses the persona as a frame of reference within a narrative context to raise a number of questions regarding pleasure, sensuality, awareness and the construction of a type. Like Monroe's Lorelei, the Arnold photographs point to the tension created by the juxtaposition of artifice and a genuine human presence.

The Misfits is a Monroe vehicle which conflates aspects of her star persona with the character she plays in the film. Although the film foregrounds the Monroe body as a sexual entity (particularly in the barroom scene in which she plays with a paddle board) its project is to identify Monroe's character with a more ineffable essence of Femininity which includes a spiritual sensitivity to living beings as well as an innate vulnerability, particularly when offset by Gable's essence of Masculinity. These gender-coded values, commonly found within the Western, are brought to the forefront because the film is addressing contemporary changes in social and gender relations through the conventions of the genre. The film attempts to redefine the Monroe persona through the Roslyn character, presenting a more naturalized, contemplative Monroe and, in turn, it downplays the purely sexually-defined aspects of her image.¹³ Fittingly, the photographs taken on the set of *The Misfits* point to nature and the natural world rather than highlighting the artifice associated with Monroe in earlier still images. These images are meant to humanize and illuminate Monroe, and suggest her ability to empathize with nature. Roslyn/Monroe, as conceived by the film, refines the Monroe image. The image becomes more serious, dramatic, intellectual and it associates her sensuality with an elevated state of humanity that exists beyond the physical body.

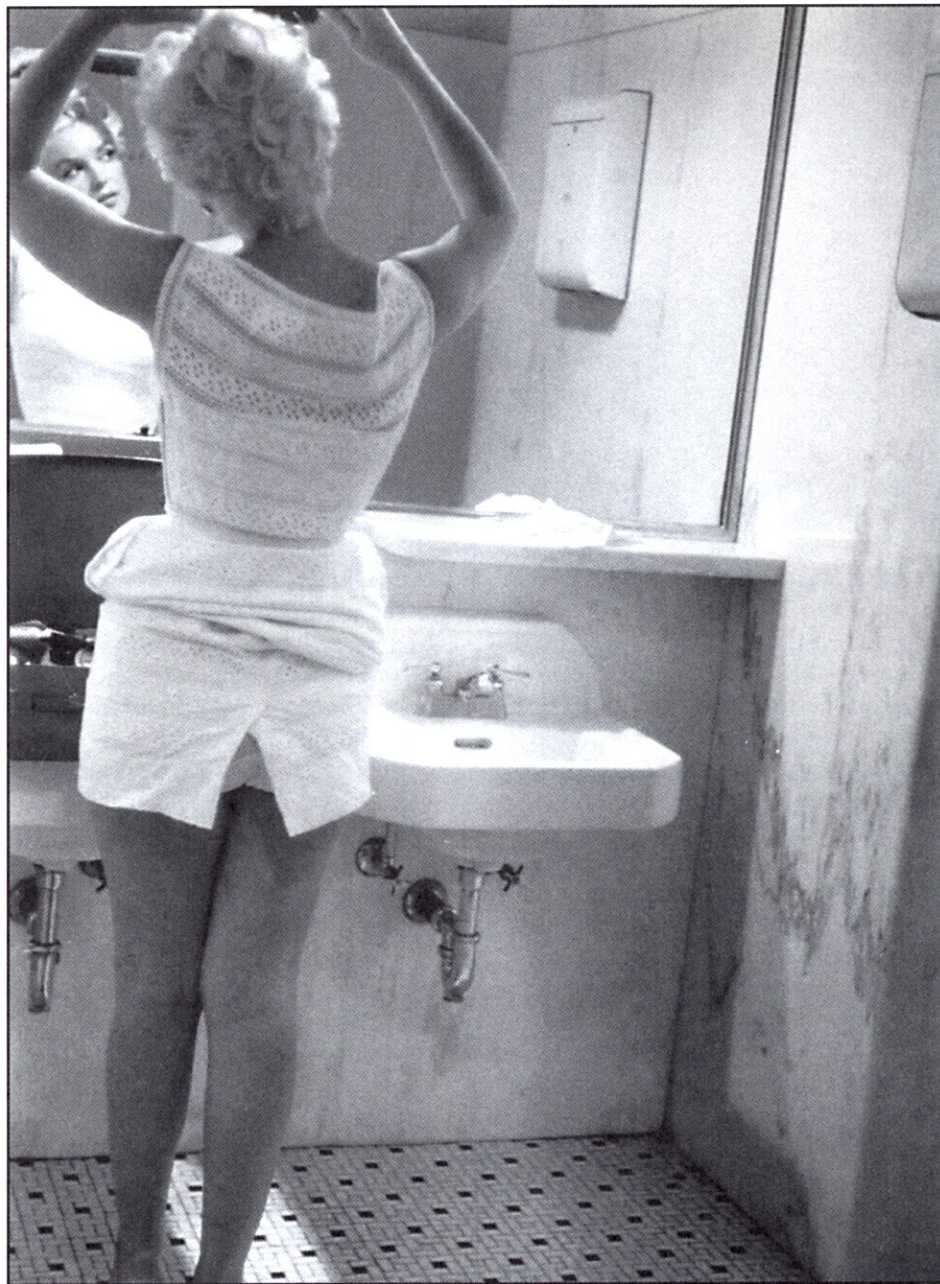
Given that this was Monroe's last film as well as Gable's, the Arnold photographs take on an elegiac quality for numerous reasons, including the fact that the film marks the end of an era—the classical studio film as a distinct art form. Many of Arnold's photographs are meditations on performance and the construction of the self as a work of art. Yet, these photographs also foreground Monroe the working woman, contemplating her craft, no longer offering an outward-directed performance for the still camera. Arnold places Monroe within a context that often functions as a commentary on Monroe as a subject and provides a narrative context using props and a precise mise-en-scène; Monroe responds by providing the photographer with a variety of graceful, generous and self-revelatory performed moments.

10. We are discussing photographs that were taken in situations in which Monroe was to a greater or lesser extent aware of a photographer's presence. It could be argued that there are 'candid' shots of Monroe that were taken when she had no awareness whatsoever of the camera.

11. Norman Mailer, *Marilyn, a biography* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, inc., 1973).

12. Eve Arnold's career bears comparison to that of Ruth Orkin; both women were noted photojournalists—both photographed Hollywood celebrities in settings and situations of realism and spontaneity. See Ruth Orkin's, *A Photo Journal* (New York: Viking Press, 1981). The book is richly illustrated and contains a text written by Orkin herself.

13. In 1954, Monroe appears in Otto Preminger's *River of No Return*; arguably, Twentieth Century-Fox attempted to use the project to expand Monroe's appeal by deglamorizing the persona and making her identity more widely accessible. Although she plays a dance-hall girl, she is given a maternal image, which makes her less threatening and more familiar.



"At the end of the long day in Bement", Eve Arnold

Two Images of the Working Woman

The series of photographs taken in conjunction with a day-long promotional trip to Bement, Illinois in 1955 addresses the subject of constructing an image for the public. In regard to photographing Monroe, Arnold says her objectives were to capture "the kind of mass hysteria she engendered" and "the mood of her behind the scenes" p. 50. The images in this session are concerned with the business of being a public person, and the work involved in maintaining and promoting an image. The shots chronicle the day's activities: Monroe on board the flight, applying her make up, having her hair combed, meeting local fans and townspeople, resting and grooming herself in a public washroom. Arnold's caption for the washroom photograph "At the end of the long day in Bement," sums this up and foregrounds Monroe as a hard-working woman. The photograph is particularly emblematic of Monroe and Arnold's work. Arnold presents elements typical of the persona and Monroe's willingness to

provide the camera with a vulnerable, spontaneous moment. Monroe is seen concentrating on combing her hair, apparently unaware of being photographed. Her 'childlikeness' is suggested in the dress still pulled up, the underwear revealed, the slightly pudgy legs. Despite the display, Arnold doesn't offer a prurient sexualized image. (It is reminiscent of the shot of Monroe's dress blown up over the subway grating, exposing her undergarment. This shot, taken the same year, echoes the image, but empties it of its objectifying potential.) Instead, the photograph reveals the unexpected: an image that provides an unguarded look at Monroe at her most intimate without exploiting her body. As Monroe appears not to be performing, the photographing functions to document an instance in the process of image construction and thereby tends to undercut the objectification inherent in Monroe's revelatory stance. The image illustrates Arnold's photojournalistic aesthetic of documenting her subject in a self-revealing gesture. On a formal level, however, the photograph is carefully



On the set of *The Misfits*, Eve Arnold

composed and framed: the hardness of the surface material—the marble, tile, enamel, chrome and mirror—is juxtaposed to the softness of the body and hair, the crumpled lacy dress. The framing is close and strikingly informal in the way Monroe's left elbow, hands and right foot are cropped. Arnold also utilizes the strong overhead fluorescent light emanating from the area above the mirror to simultaneously expose her subject and, because of the close proximity between subject and camera, to soften the overall tone of the image. The photograph captures the privacy of a woman's space, from a woman's perspective.

The Misfits photograph The historically significant photographs taken on the set of *The Misfits* include this eloquent shot of a contemplative Monroe. It is, at once, highly stylized and posed, yet it expresses the sense of a genuine moment which may or may not be a performance for the

camera. The design of the image is elemental and modern: a horizontal layering of the space—sky, mountain range, desert sand—punctuated by the verticals provided by Monroe and the sound boom. Monroe herself is divested of the artifice associated with the glamorous Hollywood star. Here, the meditative pose and the denim jacket define her presence. She is seen as the actor alone on the set. The pointed inclusion of the sound boom both connects the actor to her craft and mediates the tension produced between the self-contained Monroe in the foreground and the expansiveness of the Western landscape behind her. The photograph is not about Monroe's sexuality; the positioning of her body prevents viewer appropriation. Its primary function is to show Monroe thinking about performing. It can equally be seen as a comment on her as an artist and a statement on her chosen profession and its complex relation to human experience.

The shot is a seminal image of the Arnold/Monroe collaborations and has become deservedly a famous photograph in its own right.

Exhuming Dorothy Dandridge: The Black Sex Goddess and Classic Hollywood Cinema

by Marguerite H. Rippy

They [Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge] were the forbidden, *yet oh so delicious*, fruit in the imaginations of the same people who racially rejected them. Thus, they were racial yet non-racial looking in the eyes of the mass audience. (Bogle 123)

Introduction

Dorothy Dandridge's popular appeal stemmed from her ability to signify blackness and whiteness simultaneously upon the same body, much like other exoticized "sex goddesses" of her era. In contrast, however, to the ability of white actresses like Ava Gardner and Rita Hayworth to simulate exoticism without becoming it, Dandridge's chameleon-like ability was ultimately framed as *black* through narrative, cinematography, and media performance ephemera which associated her with primitive, unrestrained sexuality, and reactions to her continue to focus fetishistically on the quality of her skin tone, commonly referring to her in gustatorial terms—as in the quotation above by her biographer Donald Bogle. Much of this essay is devoted to a reinterpretation of Dandridge, with the intent of offering an alternative to regarding her as the *spice* in an American fantasy of feminine sexuality.

Dandridge's particular brand of exoticism, however, evokes cultural anxiety as well as cultural desire. Her cinematic performances often challenged the taboo against miscegenation as a product of black male violence against a white female body, instead positioning her as the black female victim of male violence—both black and white. This inversion of the miscegenation myth appeared repeatedly in films such as *Tarzan's Peril* (1951), *Tamango* (1959), *Island in the Sun* (1957), *The Decks Ran Red* (1958), and her well-known *Carmen Jones* (1954). All these films portrayed Dandridge's interracial appeal as both inescapable and taboo, and specifically labeled these desires as "tragic," destructive to both desirer and desired. Moreover, Dandridge's performances

complicate the taboo image by simultaneously disrupting traditional American associations with miscegenation as a black male/white female phenomenon, and by using the black female body to both elicit and police desire.¹

Posthumously, the dangerous ambiguity of her image intensified, since the narrative of self-destruction and tragedy befits the white suffering female icon whose presence enables traditional models of heterosexual desire, but when mapped onto the black female body, self-destructive sexuality reveals the historical reality which contradicts the black male/white female miscegenation taboo. The reality of Dandridge's death recalls a national history of rape, torture, murder and exploitation that unmasks the "deviant" history of whiteness in the paradigm of black/white relations.

Tragedy and Natural Sexuality

Media portrayals spanning the living and posthumous careers of Dandridge sensualize images of her despair, focusing on her body as a site that stimulates taste, touch and smell. For example, Walter Leavy refers to Dandridge's life as a "bittersweet mixture of joy and pain" in his article entitled "The Real Life Tragedy of Dorothy Dandridge" (136). Similarly, Louie Robinson in his article "Dorothy Dandridge: Hollywood's Tragic Enigma" comments, "She knew the sweet smell of success...But she also sampled the bitter side of despair" (71). Her complexion is referred to by a variety of media sources as *café au lait*, and as the quotation by Bogle which opens this essay suggests, she continues to be interpreted as a tasty morsel which adds flavor or spice to mainstream culture.

This tasty suffering is so completely associated with her

1. This association of color in performance as both eliciting and restraining transgressive desires closely resembles Eric Lott's discussion of the emergence of American blackface performance as a form of popular entertainment in *Love and Theft*.

Otto Preminger's
Carmen Jones:
publicity still.



image that it becomes hard to separate Dandridge's name from the word "tragedy" in media sources, even those which pre-date her death—*Jet* published an article in 1963 extending the aura of pathos to her daughter with a story entitled, "Tragic Story of Dandridge's Retarded Daughter." Dandridge's promotional, posthumous "autobiography" carries the subtitle "The Dorothy Dandridge Tragedy." But the root of this tragedy lies in Dandridge's failure to maintain her autonomy from her media image; the *performance* of cultural associations between femininity and sex, blackness and primitivism—associations with which she was never comfortable—ultimately subsumed the performative body. In her ability to imitate an ideal of feminine sexuality she became the figure of tragedy itself.

The performance of this type of naturalized sexuality was based upon two components: physicality and passivity. As such, the sex goddess image encouraged actresses playing this particular role to focus almost exclusively on their bodies as visual stimulus for the male gaze. At the same time, this focus on the body implied a lack of agency or intelligence on the part of the performer. This debilitating aspect of the sex goddess performance applies across color lines and often occurred against the wishes of the actress. For example, at the pinnacle of Dandridge's career, the film *Carmen Jones* publicized her through a widely-circulated shot of the silhouette of her body posed as Carmen, standing hands on hips, legs spread, head tossed back in an atmosphere of assertive availability. Despite Dandridge's attempt to distance herself from this image of herself as Carmen, this pose became the most familiar image of Dandridge.

Through its focus on the body, the generic sex goddess image confuses the sexual availability of the character and the actress—a confusion which marked both black and white sex goddesses, and which Dandridge unsuccessfully attempted to resist. As Bogle comments, "...the constant emphasis on sex—in the media and in the way a male audience perceived female sexuality—was as disturbing and damaging to [Joyce] Bryant and Dandridge as it was to that other sex goddess of the era, Marilyn Monroe" (255). However, Dandridge's discomfort with her marketing as a sexual object additionally reflected her awareness of the traditional association of the black woman with the sexual wanton. Agent Earl Mills told Bogle that she was "concerned about the myth a lot of people had about black women and their sexual activities" (259). Her role in *Carmen Jones*, although it served to fuel further these anxieties, was in many ways a mainstream variation on the role she had already established in her nightclub act, a role she abhorred, according to her sister (Bogle 256).

Nevertheless, Dandridge was far from a victim of circumstance when it came to her portrayal of the sex goddess image. Despite her association with sexual victimization, Dandridge carefully constructed her performances to evoke the pathos and exhibitionism which conformed to 1950s male expectations for female sexuality.²

She emphasized the visual physicality of her perfor-

mances, and her nightclub act was successful, Bogle suggests, because "few women on the club circuit ever used their bodies as dramatically" (190). Dandridge presented the display of her body as a natural act, and she was frequently placed in environments like the club Mocambo, which was decorated as a combination aviary and jungle evoking images of nature's clash with civilization. Through her nightclub act Dandridge increasingly repositioned herself as a "visual, rather than a vocal performer," according to Bogle, whose interview with her accompanist during this time supports the notion that she was trying to move from her image as a singer to a more visual performing persona which facilitated her transition into the film industry (201). As industry standards allowed greater display of her body, she sought greater literal exposure. In 1962, she performed a topless scene in *The Murder Men*, a film version of her television performance in the series *Cain's Hundred* on an episode called "Blues for a Junkman" (Bogle 477-79). But even her early nightclub performances emphasized her body through a wardrobe of tight dresses and sensual lyrics.

The work that Dandridge put into her visual image reveals that the notion of "natural" female sexuality, so popular at the time, was an openly public fabrication. Dandridge was consistently sexualized despite her attempts to frame this sexualization as "performance." Her song lyrics, written by male composers, powerfully accentuated the sexuality and victimization of her body, and were well-received by her audience, as evidenced by their reprinting in several of her reviews. Primarily her sexuality was associated with the color of her skin and the movement of her body within her performances, and the media treated Dandridge as if she had integrated sexuality into her image beyond her act, even though she worked diligently to contradict this image in her interviews. Many of the reviews acknowledged her discomfort with the highly sexual image, even as they reinforced it. For example, in "Hollywood's Tragic Enigma," Robinson notes, "Miss Dandridge did not want the identification of the passionate woman of easy virtue..." (76). A 1952 *Time* article which prints her suggestive song lyrics paradoxically notes that she is "A rather earnest and demure woman offstage" ("Eye and Ear" 50), while a 1955 *Time* review condescendingly adds that she "hanker[s] after some intellectual life. Dorothy Dandridge slips into a pink shirt and tight slacks and thinks seriously about her private personality" ("Two for the Show" 42). The overt equation of Dandridge's performances with natural, passive sexuality is evident in the early reviews of her nightclub act, which were printed in both mainstream and African-American publications. *Time* magazine in 1952 describes her as "a caterpillar on a hot rock" who "had the fans goggle-eyed" with her "insinuating tone" ("Eye and Ear Specialist" 50). *Life* in 1951 attributed her recent success to male direction, saying, "...under the tutelage of the same man who coached Lena Horne, Dorothy has learned the necessary tricks so well in the last year that she has wriggled and sung her way from a small Hollywood nightclub to stardom" ("Shy

Island in the Sun: on the set, with Harry Belafonte.



No More" 65). This critical trend continues into 1953, as her success is attributed by *Variety* to her "physical allure" ("Mocambo" 55) and her "provocative style" ("La Vie En Rose, N.Y." 50). These quotations illustrate the focus on Dandridge's body as a visual image whose performative pleasure is elicited by a male tutor and for a male audience.

Increasingly over the course of her career, media which targeted black audiences adapted this vision of Dandridge as a pleasure object, and *Jet* magazine ran a picture the week after her death in "The Week's Best Photos" on September 23, 1965. The photograph shows her reclining on a bed, twisted among silk sheets, describes her as "A sultry, sex symbol, widely pursued by men," and adds an anecdote attributed

to her in which a prince offers her \$100,000 to sleep with her. The caption also promotes her "autobiography," with which most sources agree she had little creative involvement ("This Week's Best Photos" 31). These are perhaps the most consistent features of Dandridge's career: the use of the visual impact of her body to sell entertainment products, and the reduction of her artistry to simple sexuality. Over the course of her career she endorsed products ranging from Rice-A-Roni to cigarettes, although never with the economic success of her white counterparts. Her advertisements were largely restricted to the black press, appearing mainly in *Ebony* and *Jet*, and her commodification did not retain its potency after her death.

But if her economic value diminished following her death, the interpretation of her performances as physical/visual events didn't change much over the following twenty years, as evidenced by Walter Leavy's retrospective article on Dandridge published in *Ebony* in 1986. Leavy comments, "[Nightclub audiences] really liked what they saw—the flawless figure, the dreamy eyes, the smooth *café au lait* complexion, the sensuous mouth and smooth elegance" ("Real Life Tragedy" 137). In fact, the success of her career increased proportionally in relation to her association with "native" sexuality. Despite Dandridge's effort to shed her image as a sexual object, and to contextualize her sexuality as "performance" rather than naturalized reality, her film career became increasingly marked by her objectification and representation as a "native girl," paramour to a (usually white) male lover. After her critical success in *Carmen Jones*, Dandridge appeared in a series of films which depicted her in reductive stereotypes, eroding rather than supporting her reputation as a serious actress.

Her resistance to this systematic sexualization is illustrated by her pursuit of a precedent-setting trial in 1957, in which Dandridge sued

Confidential magazine and won a \$10,000 settlement for a slanderous article which linked her to illicit affairs. Rebutting the very notion of sex appeal, Dandridge said, "I don't believe in sex appeal. What people call sex appeal is the tremendous vitality generated by a good actress. It has nothing to do with tight sweaters and low-cut dresses" ("Is Dandridge Too Sexy for Television?" 55). Dandridge made several public statements on this subject in 1957 in an attempt to refute articles in *Hep* and *Sepia*, as well as the *Confidential* article, all of

2. Richard Dyer notes as evidence for the 1950s interest in sexual relations the publication of the Kinsey reports, as well as the first publication of *Confidential* and *Playboy* magazines in 1951 and 1953. Dyer refers to the 1950s as an era when "sex was seen as perhaps the most important thing in life" ("Monroe and Sexuality" 24).



Robert Rossen's *Island in the Sun* (1957), with Michael Rennie

which depicted Dandridge's private life as a string of interracial affairs. She tried to counter these with her own article in *Sepia* which again suggested that she stayed unmarried "for the sake of members of my race" (qtd. in Bogle 374). She may have chosen to sue *Confidential* in particular because it was known for titillating its readers with specifically interracial tales of desire. While white media were the first to focus on the "sex" aspect of the sex goddess image, black media increasingly adapted a focus on her sexual imagery into their more traditional hyping of her as the "goddess" of domesticity. Frequently, despite her public and open resistance to this sexualization of her image beyond her act, the industry and the media continued to define her in physical terms.

The methods used to sexually subordinate Dandridge in her early reviews tend to conform to a commonplace media strategy for depicting both white and black sex goddesses as female objects of the male gaze, characterized by explicit sexual material and the careful tutelage of a male director or agent. This reaction to these women might be labeled the Trilby syndrome, in that male reviewers and critics are always eager to find a Svengali behind the female performer. For Dandridge, the credit often went to Phil Moore, who was presented not only in his role as the author of her lyrics, but as the artist of her image.³ *Time* magazine in 1952 reports, "Dorothy got started...when the practiced eyes of Pianist-

Arranger Phil Moore lit on her at Hollywood's Mocambo" ("Eye and Ear" 50), ignoring the fact that she had been performing since she was a young girl, and was already receiving regular nightclub bookings. This echoes the suggestion in *Life* in 1951 that Moore "brought out Dorothy's suppressed sultriness" ("Shy No More" 67), and *Ebony* retains this perspective in its 1986 re-write article which asserts that Phil Moore "taught her to mask her shyness" so that she could be a nightclub success (Leavy, "Real Life Tragedy" 137). Indeed, Moore did write the lyrics to many of her sexually subservient songs which garnered such media attention, and he may have helped Dandridge perfect her nightclub routine's appeal to male notions of sexuality. But Dandridge's own view of her relationship to Moore seems to be one of artistic equality, and she has been quoted as saying to him before seeking another lyricist, "...you are playing Svengali. I am nobody's Trilby. I'm an artist in my own right" (Dandridge and Conrad 86).⁴

Despite Dandridge's assertions of authorship of her image, however, she is repeatedly constructed as the art form which is molded by the male artist. This denial of female agency can be explained partly, as Dyer has noted, by the 50s ideology of sexuality, which was based on a theory that "Women are to *be* sexuality, yet this really means as a vehicle *for* male sexuality" ("Monroe and Sexuality" 41). In fact, Dandridge studied with the Hollywood Actor's Laboratory, a

West coast version of the Group Theatre. The Actor's Laboratory focused on acting as a craft, and Dandridge took this concept seriously. The Actor's Laboratory was an interesting influence as well because it was an organization on the private *Red Channels* 1952 blacklist. This choice of craft over conformity to mainstream cultural values indicates that Dandridge was willing to damage her marketability for the sake of artistry. In fact, her association with the Actor's Lab caused a serious brush with controversy and negative press that foreshadowed the trajectory of Dandridge's career.

At an informal Actor's Laboratory gathering, Dandridge danced with actor Anthony Quinn, unwittingly sparking a controversy that would challenge her early career. Columnists Hedda Hopper and Jim Henaghan censured Dandridge's role in the interracial dancing scandal, and the black press and Hollywood Democratic Committee responded in defense of the Lab's activities. The Actor's Lab was labeled a Communist front by the Tenney Committee in 1948, and therefore many of their activities seemed suspicious to the public. Dandridge wrote a letter in her own defense which was published in the *California Eagle* on September 23, 1948 and which defended her association with the Actor's Lab as in the interests of advancing both her career and her race (Bogle 154-57). This allusion to professional and social advancement was a strategy Dandridge and her publicists would use again in the future to manage controversy over her relationships or portrayals of black female sexuality. This strategy distanced her from the exhibition of personal sexual desire, and instead re-framed her actions as induced by economic and social responsibility, an explanation designed to satisfy mainstream American mores without apologizing for her behavior.

Even this assertive letter of Dandridge's, however, suffers the marks of a Svengali. The language sounds surprisingly formal and political for Dandridge, and when she was questioned about the letter by MGM four years later, she appears not to have recognized the words as her own. The language was misquoted and misdated, but substantively the same as the original; yet her co-authored response to MGM repudiates her earlier language, saying, "...the exact wording of this particular quotation is not the kind of language I use..." (qtd. in Bogle 22). Again, she closes the letter with a denial of her personal agency, asserting, "My sole interests are towards having a successful career and aiding my people" (qtd. in Bogle 222). Equally interesting as Dandridge's muted personal voice in this particular incident, however, is that an incident centering on sexuality quickly became a question of politics. The 1948 incident was presumably controversial in its threat to anti-miscegenation statutes of the time. But the MGM inquiry of 1952 was solely concerned with "Un-American" political affiliations: was she an active member of organizations like the NAACP, the Progressive Citizens of America, the Hollywood Arts, Sciences and Professions Council, and the Actor's Laboratory? Still, the only charge that directly involves her own speech relates back to the dangers of miscegenation. Dandridge's dark skin tone automatically associated her not only with sexuality in the minds of American audi-

ences but also with an anti-American connotation among primarily white institutions of the time, including the government and the film industry. Whereas the sexual association with actresses who played the sex goddess were overt and common to both black and white media sources, in the case of the black sex goddess hegemonic discourse subtextually contains an association of national otherness as well.

The Taboo Kiss: Violence and Miscegenation

The paradoxes surrounding Dandridge's career are never clearer than in her nomination in 1954 for an Academy Award for her leading role in *Carmen Jones*. Although she received critical acclaim for her performance, her role depicted her being graphically beaten, chased, tied up, and finally murdered. Like her media image, the role of Carmen demanded a physical enactment of the male ideals of female sexuality, and several media sources began to refer to Dandridge simply as "Carmen."⁵ Partially, this association grew out of the marketing campaign for *Carmen Jones* which used Dandridge's body as a powerful visual lure. Although Harry Belafonte received top-billing, Dandridge's body dominates the promotional imagery. In a three-page advertisement which ran in *Variety* on November 17, 1954, a full-page silhouette of Dandridge in the familiar Carmen pose is accentuated by text which states: "the whole nation is flipping for CARMEN"(9). As the reader follows the instructions to "flip here" and turns the page, a picture of a miniature Dorothy Dandridge in front of the huge shadow of her figure provides the centerpiece of a series of favorable movie review quotations which acclaim Dandridge's "sultry," "blazing" performance (10).

The popularity and controversy of *Carmen Jones* drew from a variety of cultural sources. Archetypally, as Bogle assesses, *Carmen* "was tied to a long-held male concept of the alluring, sexually potent woman who has the power to enslave and destroy men and who therefore must be destroyed, [but] Dandridge transcended it" (293). Although Dandridge certainly complicated this image, this archetype ultimately subsumed her off-screen life as well as the role in *Carmen Jones*. Politically, *Carmen* was released in 1954 amid a flurry of cultural controversy from both black and white political sectors. Its release coincided with the emergence of the civil rights movement, and as such, it was controversial because it could have been interpreted as reifying the image of the black woman as a sexual wanton.⁶ In order to alleviate this side of

3. Moore is an interesting choice, since he also worked with several white "sex goddess" actresses on their performances of feminine sexuality. In fact, he worked with Ava Gardner, Marilyn Monroe, and Dorothy Dandridge simultaneously at one point early in their careers.

4. Quotations from Dandridge's autobiography should not necessarily be taken as authentic since it was not completed at the time of her death and was not published until five years after her suicide by co-author Earl Conrad. In addition, it contains contradictory passages that seem to recapitulate many of the misogynist notions of her passivity, rather than offering uncensored insight into her own views and beliefs.

5. "On the Bright Road" of "Carmen" and "Joe" *The New York Times* 24 Oct 1954; Nancy Seely, "The Road Ahead for Carmen" *New York Post* 7 Nov. 1954

6. "Brown v. Board of Education" was tried in 1954; Rosa Parks' initiation of the bus boycott occurred in 1955.

the controversy, the proceeds from the premiere were donated to the NAACP, a strategy which seems to have been effective.

But *Carmen* was also controversial in its challenge to the standards of middle-class morality, as represented by the Breen Production Code comment which found *Carmen Jones* problematic in its lack of condemnation of Carmen's immorality and "overemphasis on lustfulness" (qtd. in Bogle 266). Thus, the scenes of violence against Carmen's body are less controversial than those of her being kissed, and in fact the Breen Code seems to desire greater punishment for her. Within the film itself there are several sexually violent scenes which underscore the focus on her body. One scene in particular exhibited a level of violence against Dandridge's black body that would never have been demonstrated against a white icon. At one point Carmen breaks free from Joe (Harry Belafonte) and attempts to escape by running across moving train cars and jumping down on the other side. Joe catches up to Carmen, however, and wrestles her to the ground as she bites him, ties her arms and legs together, and lugs her back to his jeep. Both actors reportedly did their own stunts, and it seems remarkable that Dandridge was able to run on a moving train in high-heeled pumps, much less was allowed to jump from the moving train and be wrestled to the ground by her co-star. I would suggest, in fact, that this level of graphic violence against the female body was permitted only because Dandridge was marked as black. At the same time, however, the depiction of this violence against the black female body, even when rendered by a black man, made visible a cultural reality which had heretofore been obscured. Her physicality does in some ways "transcend" the role, as Bogle suggests. Perhaps more importantly, it suggests a direction for her career that would both titillate and disturb American viewers, while proving ultimately destructive to Dandridge herself. By making visible the violence visited upon the black female body, Dandridge selected a career path which challenged the traditional formulation of the miscegenation myth in which the white female body is victimized by the black male. Many of her later films would even place Dandridge opposite a violent white male counterpart and openly challenge miscegenation tropes.

Throughout Preminger's Technicolor production, he courts controversy by positioning Dandridge's body as the focal point of the action and the dialogue. Her conscientiously crafted wardrobe accentuates her breasts, hips and legs, as her loud bawdy language and lipstick highlight her mouth. In fact, as Joe strangles Carmen in the final scene, her open mouth becomes the symbol of her death. Trembling, a bit open, highly stylized and sensual, her mouth remains the final image of the tragic Carmen, and it seems to be the source for much of the anxiety surrounding this image, as well as the desire. The mouth of the black woman was already a powerful symbol of cultural anxiety, as demonstrated by the ban on interracial kissing in the cinema, a ban which several of Dandridge's later roles would challenge. But the visibility of Carmen's mouth and body also became a source of anxiety for Dandridge herself, as she resisted her increased association with this role of the sexually promiscuous

and physically assaulted woman.

Carmen was not the first role to show her as a bestialized and subjugated woman,⁷ but it was largely responsible for trapping Dandridge within the "sex goddess" image, and through her association with Carmen she was continuously reinscribed by the media as an aesthetically pleasing object of male desire. One of the strategies Dandridge repeatedly used to distance herself from Carmen's low-class promiscuity was to mimic the "ladylike" behaviors of the white middle-class domestic ideal. Although Dandridge laments that she was not allowed to portray the domestic aspect of her image on-screen, she was repeatedly recontextualized as "domestic" in the media, particularly by the media written for an African-American demographic. The domestication of the black woman was an obvious political goal of the black community in the 1950s, as it attempted to combat the image of the black woman as sexualized beast with images of her domestic subservience. Although *Ebony* frequently refers to Dandridge as "Hollywood's first authentic love goddess of color,"⁸ the writers also describe her in domestic terms. In 1962, *Ebony* published an article featuring Dandridge in her spacious Hollywood home with her new husband. Next to the commentary describing her as a "sex symbol...the world over" (117), pictures feature Dandridge lounging in various rooms of her house and explain that "Next to her career, interior decorating rates as her principal interest" (Robinson, "Private World" 116-17). She is shown throughout the day shopping, personally answering all her social invitations, and finally spending a quiet evening with her husband after dinner, which Dorothy, "a homebody, likes to prepare...at home herself" (Robinson, "Private World" 121).⁹ Seeking to emulate the media treatment of white "sex goddesses," *Ebony* tried to depict Dandridge as a sex goddess who nevertheless desired love and a husband. *Ebony* openly regrets that white industry will not exploit her more, complaining that her films "did not reflect the continuity of exploitation that would normally have been lavished upon a feminine star who burst upon the world scene with the impact Miss Dandridge had evidenced" (Robinson, "Dorothy Dandridge" 75). The very notion that exploitation is something that can be "lavished" is ironic coming from a media source which sought to increase societal respect for African-Americans. But magazines like *Ebony* chose to advance a male-centered African-American agenda which, like the mainstream media, obscured any notion of Dandridge as an artist, and instead embraced traditional sexist notions of femininity which reinscribe sexuality within domesticity. But Dandridge's ladylike domesticity was a largely off-screen representation, and most of her on-screen performances, particularly those post-*Carmen Jones*, depict her as a sexually available, ethnically marked woman linked to interracial desire.

Dandridge's "Native" Appeal

Ironically, the power of Dandridge's sexual connotations may have caused the demise of her career even as she was reaching her greatest popularity, for she increasingly became associated with interracial affairs, most notably with *Carmen's*

director Otto Preminger. This interracial association proved both titillating and controversial. Studios that offered to place her opposite leading white male actors then became caught in their own discomfort with a fear of audience disapproval. As she became an explicit object of white male desire, directors who paired her with a white leading man attempted to distance their films from the controversy over race raging in American culture by recontextualizing Dandridge's race as anything but African-American. As Michael Omi remarks, she "presented a quandary for studio executives who weren't sure what race and nationality to make her...Ironically, what they refused to entertain as a possibility was to present her as what she really was, a black American woman" (458). She appears as an African "tribeswoman" in *Tarzan's Peril* (1951) and *The Decks Ran Red* (1958), a Cuban slave of African descent in *Tamango* (1958), a West Indian woman in *Island in the Sun* (1957) and a woman of undetermined European origins in *Malaga* (1960). In fact, following *Carmen Jones* she was contextualized almost exclusively as non-American. The only film role in which she played an African-American woman post-*Carmen Jones* was another Preminger-directed remake of a successful American musical, in this case *Porgy and Bess* (1959).

Dandridge's performance style integrated elements which both reflected a "non-American" influence and a focus on her body as naturally exotic from the earliest stages of her career, and two of her early soundies were *Jungle Jig* and *Congo Clambake*. In her nightclub act at the Waldorf, one of her numbers featured what Bogle calls an "island-style" dance number which reportedly drove the crowd wild (327). It was popular enough to be depicted in a triptych of photos showing her performing the erotic removal of her shoes in a 1955 *Ebony* article with the caption "Barefoot at the Waldorf" ("Dorothy Dandridge's Greatest Triumph" 38), and again in a *Hue* article in 1956 ("What's Next" 50). Her exoticism marked a cultural boundary that was subject to constant renegotiation in the 1950s—a boundary between unacceptable interracial sex and acceptable interracial violence. There seems to have been considerable concern over the positioning of Dandridge's legs when she played Melmendi, the African queen in *Tarzan's Peril*. The Breen Code was unconcerned with the act of physically tying up her body, but warns that she must not be "staked out in such wise that her legs are spread-eagled. Such a position...would be offensively sex suggestive" (qtd. in Bogle 183). Repeatedly, this becomes the cultural code for depicting Dandridge's sexuality—biting, wrestling, and touching is permissible as long as the violence of the contact is emphasized over its sexual nature. Frequently, her body is most accessible to her male counterparts during moments of violence, since she is rarely shown in an embrace motivated by affection, but is frequently clutched, clinched and bound during moments of violent desire which is inflamed by her resistance or rebellion.

Following *Carmen Jones*, these tropes of the non-American black female victim contrasted to the domineering violence of the white man reappeared with increasing frequency in her career. This violent relationship was often associated with

sexual overtones as well, conforming to the traditional American miscegenation narratives. One of her most controversial films, *Island in the Sun*, provoked heated media discussion of its interracial love theme. A story in *Jet* titled "Torrid New Love Story Starts Interracial Love Code Debate" wraps the political motive for miscegenated imagery within an aesthetic motive, a call for greater "realism." Dandridge herself attempts to bracket the film outside American social controversy, commenting, "Margot, whom I play, is not an American Negro girl but a West Indian, and she would not be self-conscious about or sensitive to an interracial love affair. It happens all the time in the West Indies" (58). *Jet* praises producer Darryl Zanuck for reaching "realistic heights" in the film, but simultaneously criticizes the film for a "lack of realism." Both Dandridge and *Jet* allude to the fact that interracial relationships were a facet of "reality" which had long gone unrepresented in American society. Dandridge must have been keenly aware of the controversy provoked by interracial relationships, following her relationship with Preminger and in light of her later marriage to Jack Denison, both interracial relationships subject to media scrutiny. The preoccupation with whom Dandridge could or could not touch remains the primary focal point for the media discussion of her miscegenation roles, as illustrated by the cover title of the *Jet* article on *Island in the Sun*, "Why Dandridge Can't Kiss Her White Film Lover" (56). But, as this article notes, the interracial taboo is also explicitly heterosexual. D. W. Griffith had shown an interracial kiss a generation earlier in his film *The Greatest Thing In Life*, but it was a kiss between a dying black soldier and his white male friend. Unlike this homoerotic kiss, supporting a unified national military identity, Dandridge's interracial kisses were consistently portrayed as nationally transgressive, and in *Tarzan's Peril*, *Tamango*, and *The Decks Ran Red* they are surrounded by a subplot of rebellion or mutiny. The transgressive potential of Dandridge's post-*Carmen Jones* roles is also evident in the number of her films that were scripted or directed by blacklisted artists. *Island in the Sun* was directed by Robert Rosen, *Tamango* by John Berry, and *Malaga's* screenplay was written by Donald Ogden Stewart. All three of these films could have shared the promotional caption given *Tamango*, "The story they said could never be filmed."

Island in the Sun ultimately avoided much of its controversial material by sanitizing sex through politics. Dandridge

7. Her earlier role in *Tarzan's Peril* depicts her as physically bound as well, much to the pleasure of the viewer according to *Life* magazine's reprint of the image of her bound and gagged with the caption, "Her part so impressed producer that role was enlarged" ("Shy No More" 67).

8. This phrase is popularized by *Ebony*, and is used by two authors in particular, Walter Leavy and Louie Robinson. The phrase appears verbatim in 1962 (Robinson, "The Private World of Dorothy Dandridge" 117), is revised slightly in 1966 to "Hollywood's first and only authentic Negro love goddess" (Robinson, "Dorothy Dandridge" 71); and reappears as "Hollywood's first authentic Black sex symbol" in 1986 (Leavy, "The Real Life Tragedy" 136) and 1993 (Leavy, "The Mystery and Real-Life Tragedy" 36).

9. Earlier in 1955 *Ebony* had already begun depicting Dandridge as an erotic homemaker, referring to her as the "curvaceous Miss Dandridge" ("Dorothy Dandridge's Greatest Triumph" 37), but quoting her as saying, "If I have a hobby, I guess it's fancy cooking" (40).



and Harry Belafonte both play characters in interracial relationships in this film, but both characters subordinate sexual desire to personal ambition. In a parallel to her character, Margot Seaton, Dandridge exhibited a desire during her work on this film to control the authorship of her image, and to script her own words. Although most of her similar attempts at cinematic control failed—for example Zanuck rejected her suggestion to shoot two versions of the film, and include physical contact between herself and Justin in a version for European release—she consistently attempted to reassert control over both her dramatic image and her media representation.

A less sanitized version of interracial relationships occurs in the film *Tamango*, which provides an excellent example of the “kill me, don’t kiss me” production code. *Tamango* is of particular interest to this study because it casts Dandridge as a woman who crosses racial boundaries, challenging traditional miscegenation taboos. Additionally, the film was marketed through the image of sexual violence surrounding her body, and she is presented as eliciting “tragic” male desire across racial boundaries. Specifically, *Tamango* depicts the threat of white male hands and lips to the black female body. One video version of *Tamango* captions the cover with a quotation, issuing from the lips of Dandridge’s character, Aiche,

and subsequently to Curt Jurgens’ character, “I’ve always hated your hands on my body” (Ivy Classics Video). The film advertisements depicted a bare-chested Jurgens restraining both Dandridge’s hands in his own as she tries to pull away from him with the caption, “Love as bold and daring as the casting!” Despite the poor production quality of the film, it provides a fascinating example of the conscious inversion of several American stereotypes of racial relationships and national identity.

The plot revolves around Jurgens’ portrayal of a white slave trader who faces a mutiny by a black lion hunter, Tamango. Dandridge plays Jurgens’ slave/lover Aiche, who feeds his desire for sadistic control of both blackness and femininity. The dilemma in this production is which male discourse will ultimately define Aiche: Tamango’s doctrine of violent black separatism or Captain Reinker’s doctrine of white capitalistic exploitation. Both men attempt to seduce Aiche into complicity with their philosophies for survival. Reinker tells her that she, like him, is interested only in her own economic advancement. He offers as an example the first instance of his sexual domination, when she “sold” herself to him for a few trinkets.

The film goes to great lengths to demonstrate Aiche’s solidarity with her captive counterparts, a task made difficult by her comparatively privileged status as mistress to the white slavetrader. In several early scenes, she recounts narratives of childhood horrors imposed by slavery which drove her to buy into the vernacular of her oppressor, reject-

ing any notions of freedom or resistance. Interestingly, the caged bird association first posed during her Club Mocambo performances reappears in this film—the first scene in which she speaks introduces her while she whistles playfully with a cage full of birds. Dandridge’s performance evokes the physical allure of her nightclub act in other ways as well, particularly in its focus on individual parts of her body. When she is first introduced, the audience sees only her bare leg as she responds to Jurgens’ request for his pipe. In *Tamango*, men literally battle for possession of Dandridge’s body. Tamango ends his rebellion by dragging Aiche down into the slave hold with him as a hostage, hoping to barter her body for his own survival. Only when Reinker shows himself willing to sacrifice Aiche’s body in order to preserve his own masculine dominance does Tamango decide to “free” Aiche. Illuminatingly, Reinker has offered her freedom as well in a previous scene. Both men, however, offer Aiche what she recognizes as a false choice. She is trapped, literally, between two spaces of masculine violence; there is no space in which she can find freedom on the slave ship. In the end, she chooses liberation through death and solidarity with Tamango and his men. Because of her “mixed-race” status, frequently alluded to in the early stages of the film, Aiche is forced to choose between two tragic alternatives of blackness and whiteness,

Tarzan's Peril (1951)



neither of which provides a source of freedom or independence for her.

Tamango is additionally interesting in that it is one of the few films which depict Dandridge ultimately in solidarity with, rather than as a deviation from, her race. In several of her films (*Carmen Jones* included) she plays an outsider to fellow blacks, and most of *Tamango* is no exception to this rule. It does, however, ultimately depict her as choosing black unity over self-advancement, an assertion which coincides with her own attempt to alleviate the similar controversies which haunted her extra-filmic career by reasserting her interest in the advancement of her race over her own personal sentiments.¹⁰

Aiche's false choice is similar to Dandridge's own subject position in another way as well. Dandridge had rejected the role of Tuptim in *The King and I* a few years earlier because, according to Bogle, she was reluctant to play a slave (332-33). But following the success of *The King and I*, and her own three-year professional drought between her role as Carmen and her next film, *Island in the Sun*, Dandridge seems to have reconsidered this choice. Off-screen, Dandridge seems to have chosen economic independence and survival over her previous notion of racial advancement.

Artist or Art? Exploitation versus Adoration

The controversy surrounding these films centered on Dandridge's challenge to the traditional image of miscegenation as an act committed by the violent black man against a passive white female object of desire. From her appearance in the early *Tarzan's Peril*, she was positioned as an object of white male desire who provoked destructive violence. The very act of portraying this violence illuminated a cultural paradox which challenged mainstream notions of morality for both black and white cultural entities of the era. As Bogle notes, by placing her opposite a white male lead in *Tarzan's Peril*, Dandridge became "touchable flesh and blood," accessible to crossover audiences in a way that previous black female entertainers had not been (184).

Too frequently, however, her touchability manifests itself through the violence of male hands—both black and white. She is literally man-handled throughout her cinematic career, and rumors that her divorce was due to physical as well as emotional abuse imply that ultimately her on-screen performance merged dangerously with her off-screen existence. Ironically, despite Dandridge's continued efforts to separate herself from her portrayals, the pattern of racial and gender choices which mark her cinematic roles came to mark her own life as well. Like Aiche, caught between black and white male worlds of violence, Dandridge ultimately chose self-destruction as her form of authorship. Bogle asserts that she transcended the cultural concept of "the reckless, sexually charged woman who destroys her men and therefore must herself be destroyed," and instead portrayed a "modern Black woman: confident, determined to live life on her own terms, and fearless in a man's world" (xxiv). But it would seem that this "man's world" transformed Dandridge into the agent of her own destruction, rather than her salvation.

Paid to create images which fed male desire, actresses who chose to fulfill the image of "sex goddess" found themselves faced with a self-destructive cycle of image production. In order to maintain their economic status, they were encouraged to generate images of themselves based on victimized sexuality. Dandridge was never comfortable with the mainstream model of female sexuality which she was forced to emulate, and as A. S. Young notes, "Both [Dandridge and Monroe] fought mightily to gain acceptance as talented artists, as performers, rather than as sex-goddesses men lusted for from one corner of the earth to the other" (9). Any attempt to alter her image met with immediate public censure, both social and economic. Caught in this double-bind, Dandridge was forced into a self-destructive choice between leaving her profession or facing a narrow space of cultural definition which simultaneously celebrated her image while denying her artistic agency.

The self-destructive nature of this cultural definition was magnified for Dandridge because the 1950s vision of female sexuality in which she was trapped was also racist. As defined by Dyer, this feminine ideal was based on the assumption that the "white woman is...the most highly prized possession of the white man, and the envy of all other races" (43). In her autobiography, Dandridge seemed aware of her distance from the white sex goddesses of her era, confessing, "America was not geared to make me into a Liz Taylor, a Monroe, a Gardner. My sex symbolism was as a wanton, a prostitute, not as a woman seeking love and a husband" (183). In this way, Dandridge acknowledges the dichotomy which white female sex goddesses were expected to embody, physically evoking sexuality on the one hand, but remaining subservient models of domesticity on the other hand. She accepts this image of domesticity as an integral part of stardom, necessary to the actress in order to make herself more marketable. In an era when female stars were used to sell everything from lingerie to refrigerators, an image which integrated the trappings of middle-class morality with glamorous sexuality was highly prized.¹¹

The 1950s ideal of femininity as an unattainably sublime object does not apply equally to black and white images. The nature of racism does not de-sexualize black femininity; rather it elevates *white* female sexuality in relationship to black female sexuality. Whereas the white woman becomes an idealized, inaccessible object of desire, the body of the black woman is perceived as the accessible, material means of attaining carnal satisfaction. This image plays out on the screen through the violent images of subjugation which surround Dandridge. White sex goddesses like Marilyn Monroe represented an unattainable ideal of femininity, rather than the attainable exotic Other woman. As such, the image of the white woman can psychically satisfy even in absence or death, since it is the idea of her which is important to the American psyche; in contrast, the black female body is useless once its physical and material presence can no longer titillate the male observer. This simultaneous sexual elevation of the white woman and subjugation of the black is manifested in the American miscegenation myth. The miscegenation myth has

been used to symbolize the sexual violence of the black man and the objectification of the white woman, thus effectively obscuring the historical predominance of the black woman's rape and subjugation at the hands of the white man. In this model, the suffering white female body can be used to perpetuate the myth of miscegenation, whereas the black female body as victim can only undermine this myth as a visible reminder of the historical reality of the sexual and material subjugation of the black woman within the American patriarchy.

Dandridge's relative cultural obscurity supports this basic contradiction within American misogyny. While images of violently subjugated women are widely circulated, the reality of the systematic social violence practiced against the black woman remains practically invisible. Cultural codes demanded that Dandridge either be placed opposite black leading men who do violence to her body, or that her on-screen interaction with white actors be carefully policed to conform to mainstream moral and political expectations, as represented by institutions like the Breen commission and the NAACP. When white actors enacted the popular trope of romantic rape with Dandridge, their physical contact with her was either emphasized violence rather than sex, or was edited from the text entirely. In order to distance the enactment even further from contemporary American cultural and political tensions, Dandridge was unfailingly marked as non-American in explicitly interracial roles. The icon of the suffering woman, central to the construction of white female sexuality, necessitates the figurative burial of Dandridge because of the cultural implications of rendering visible black female sexuality.

The black woman complicates the American image of miscegenation because she reminds dominant American culture that the miscegenation myth is just that—a myth based upon notions of passive white female sexuality and overwhelming black male sexuality. This myth demands the obliteration of the black female body, the evidence of female sexuality which has historically been attractive to and victimized by white male desire. Thus, to access Dandridge, we must unearth her, first from the cultural oblivion which has been inflicted on her by dominant culture, and second from the misogynist discourse of her contemporary culture. The awkward paradox which I have been unable to reconcile, however, is that exhumation is itself an act of violence, and that Dandridge's voice has been erased to such a degree that it largely remains inaudible. Direct interviews with her are rare, and her purported autobiography seems largely a publicity project. Even Bogle's interviews of those who personally and professionally surrounded Dandridge offer only fragmented echoes of her own voice, as if filtered through multiple ciphers. Sadly, it is virtually impossible to recover any sense of her authentic artistic voice, even once the discourse which surrounds it has been dislodged. While she was clearly an active agent in her own production, her image remains in our culture as a collective work—an indelible image of our own anxiety and desire which obscures the artist even as it reveals her art.

10. As discussed earlier, Dandridge turned to racial solidarity when attacked either by dominant white discourse for her "Un-American" associations, or by black organizations like the NAACP for her controversial portrayals of a sexually objectified black woman which did not fit contemporary notions for "Advancement for Colored People."

11. Many recent critics have written on the commodification of the female star to sell domestic products during this era of Hollywood film. See, for example, Charles Eckert's "The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window" or Charlotte Cornelia Herzog and Jane Marie Gaines' "Puffed Sleeves Before Tea-Time" in Gledhill's *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. In addition, the binary contradiction embodied in female stars has been discussed by Dyer in terms of Lana Turner as well in his essay, "Four Films of Lana Turner" in *Star Texts*.

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by Robert K. Lightning

Dorothy Dandridge: Ruminations on Black Stardom

ALTHOUGH I WILL EXAMINE PERFORMANCE IN

passing, this article is concerned centrally with Dorothy Dandridge's screen persona. Why this specific topic rather than performance per se? The choice is due to an opportune occurrence, a recent retrospective of Dandridge films in New York, programmed by historian and Dandridge biographer Donald Bogle (complete with the exception of certain minor early roles and of course *Porgy and Bess*; I was unable to see a double bill of the 1953 *Bright Road* and the 1958 *The Decks Ran Red*). Prior to the retrospective and biography I would assess Dandridge's fame as deriving from 1) her status as the first black performer to attain certain specific signifiers of genuine Hollywood stardom (a glamorous and/or sexual image that functions as such *within* individual narratives, an Oscar nomination in the Best Actress category, star billing, a cover of *Life* magazine, etc.) and 2) her function as symbolic victim of Hollywood racism (deriving from her inability to function consistently within the Hollywood system, a fact which is often cited as contributing to her death at 43 from an overdose of prescription drugs). I would argue that these facts have garnered her iconic status within the black community and more or less footnote recognition outside of that community. My own feelings for Dandridge prior to the retrospective corresponded closely to this presumed assessment.

It was a complete surprise (and, as a black viewer, personal delight) to discover that there was a *persona* to discuss at all, although as Bogle notes, performers of much less public recognition (e.g. Louise Brooks) have been subjected to more critical examination. If I focus now on her screen image it is because of my feeling that not only has an important star been largely overlooked but that what that star does *on screen* has been largely usurped by her symbolic function. Nonetheless any writer who undertakes to discuss screen image in isolation from the star's particular historical context rightly runs the risk of being labelled irresponsible. This weighs very heavily particularly when examining the per-

former who finds her/himself in the position of being both black and a Hollywood star (a position I will discuss as contradictory and problematic). Its problematic nature is suggested by this assessment of Dandridge made by actor and co-star Brock Peters:

"For me, it was clear that she was insecure...And obviously it wasn't helped by trying to achieve stardom in an industry that had no conscious place for her". (*Dorothy Dandridge, A Biography*, Donald Bogle, Amistad Press, Inc. 1997, p.415).

I will argue later that the black star's status is highly unstable and this derives from the plethora of interests to which he/she must remain responsive.

Biographical data and personal reflection have proved helpful and I will occasionally employ them. That personal temperament has an obvious bearing on performance cannot be denied. Dandridge appears to have been one of those sensitive performers for whom performance was often a reflection of personal emotional states, particularly painful ones. Late in her career, plagued by both personal and career problems and subjecting herself to increasing isolation, she would in her loneliness make late night phone calls to friends and even passing acquaintances, sometimes performing songs over the phone (she was also a successful nightclub singer). Of these performances lifelong friend Geri Branton notes

"And she sang probably better than I had ever heard her sing. But she sang it with such feeling. And it implied her loneliness..." (Bogle, p.527)

The problem here in citing biographical data is a familiar one, one noted by Molly Haskell when discussing Marilyn Monroe: For the tragic star (particularly one who dies prematurely) the career becomes a mere adjunct to the personal



Island in the Sun
(1975): publicity still.

tragedy, a *fait accompli*. Again we have the usurpation of the screen work by the symbolic function. Although kept to a minimum biographical data has been used: I think it is worth the risk.

Hollywood, civil rights, and the tragic mulatto

That historically Hollywood has functioned to propagandize the interests of the world's leading democratic-capitalist power can be derived easily from much of its product. It is a function that, in times of crisis (e.g. World War II), can become more or less explicit. That Hollywood is nonetheless *not* a branch of the state is also demonstrably true: It has been able occasionally to produce films more or less critical of democratic capitalism (*Meet John Doe*) even in times of crisis (e.g. *Lifeboat*).

It is the *threat* of state intervention into Hollywood's independent production modes, as well as various representatives of the citizenry into its independent artistic decisions (in the form of protests, boycotts, etc.), that has largely determined Hollywood's amenability to the state as well as its willingness to police itself (e.g. The Production Code). It is no coincidence then that historically among the duties of the president of the Motion Picture Producers Association has been both the lobbying of legislators in Washington and regulating the moral content of Hollywood films, and that among its ranks have been two former functionaries of the executive branch of the U.S. government (Will Hays and Jack Valenti).

It is in this nether region of cooperation with both the state and the citizenry that I would place many of the gains of Hollywood's black performers. It should be noted immediately that this should not in any way diminish the valuation of the *creative* accomplishments of the performers who have been subjected to Hollywood's intermittent celebration and publicity. It is only to note that Hollywood's promotion and recognition of its black stars can carry far reaching political undertones. Example: An Oscar to Hattie McDaniel in 1940

serves, on the one hand, to mitigate local protests that accompanied the release of *Gone with the Wind* regarding its use of black stereotypes. On the other hand, with a fascist dictator threatening in Europe, an Oscar to a black woman serves to demonstrate U.S. liberalism to the world as well as to divert attention from democratic capitalism's own contradictions and fascist tendencies (e.g. Jim Crow segregation policies).

Dandridge's initial stardom must be viewed in light of post-war contradictions in U.S. international and domestic policies, where the U.S. is actively engaged in ideological warfare with its wartime ally, the Soviet Union, while its own black populace is becoming increasingly vocal in its protests against injustices. An Oscar nomination to Dandridge in 1954 as well as the international publicity surrounding this achievement (including an appearance at the Academy Awards ceremony as a presenter, as well as a subsequent appearance at Cannes at the opening of *Carmen Jones*) serves again to trumpet U.S. liberalism to the world as well as to divert local attention from alternative political modes.

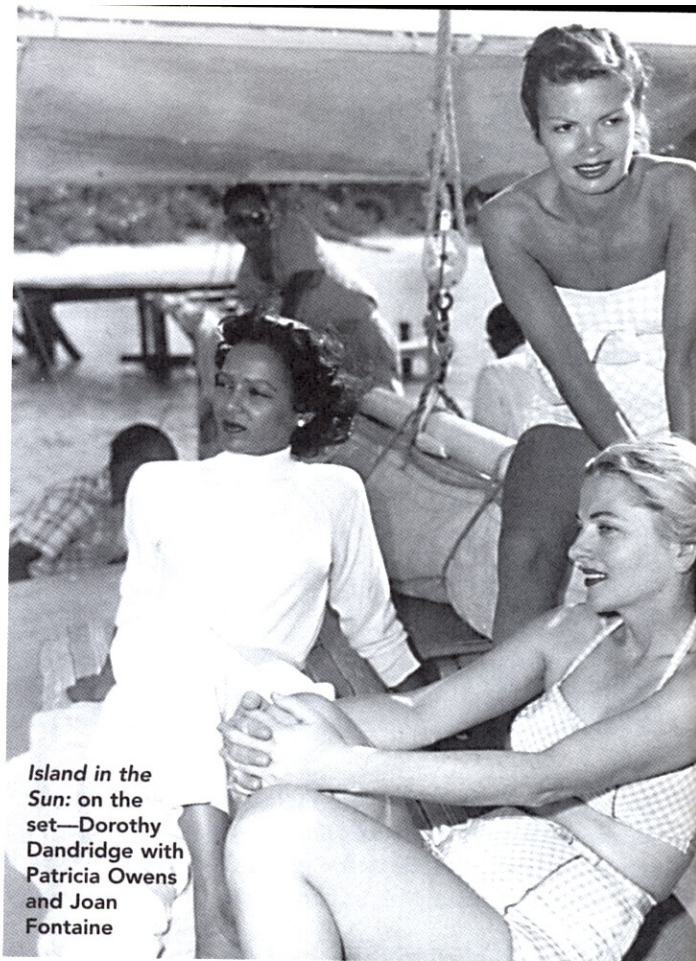
The question of course arises as to what happens to the black star once he/she serves this politically symbolic function. I would now like to adduce a symbolic figure first examined by Mr. Bogle in his landmark study *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (1973, expanded ed. Continuum Publishing Co. 1989). In this study Mr. Bogle delineates the prototypes (to which the title refers) that have largely defined the imaging of blacks (even when portrayed by whites) in motion pictures (though they obviously derive from earlier sources, such as vaudeville). As might be guessed all five types are first united on screen in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. Griffith's blacks correspond to the stereotypes as follows: The Cameron family servants or "faithful souls" (tom and mammy types, the latter a variation on the comic coon type); Lynch the mulatto and Gus the renegade (the buck or brute, noteworthy for his threat to white hegemony in general and white

womanhood in particular); and the mulatto (often designated "tragic" and here represented by Lydia, Senator Stoneman's mistress/housekeeper). Time does not permit a more thorough examination but that the stereotypes continue to function as models in fictional accounts of blacks can be deduced from the oeuvres of certain black stars: The chief characteristic of toms and mammies, their comfort of and nurture of whites, is a significant element in Sidney Poitier's 60s films and arises intermittently in Whoopi Goldberg films. One recent film *Glory* (Zwick, 1989) disconcertingly links stereotype again to historical event, not only giving the models their fullest representation in years (unironically and apparently unrefracted by time) but throwing them (literally) into the same narrative tent. With the obvious exception of the mammy type, they correspond as follows: Rawlins/Morgan Freeman (tom); Trip/Denzel Washington (brute/buck); Jupiter Sharts/Jihmi Kennedy (coon/pickaninny); and Thomas/Andre Braugher (the mulatto, here not the product of interracial sexual mingling but a black infused with the white man's education). In a film singlemindedly concerned with justifying and reinstating historical American class and race hierarchies, the linking of stereotype to history in *Glory* (as in Griffith) has the peculiar reciprocal effect (for their respective audiences) of establishing the verisimilitude of both the stereotype and the narrative's rendering of history ("It's like writing history with lightning!" as Woodrow Wilson famously proclaimed).

It is the mulatto that particularly reveals the conservative nature of stereotypes as a concept (which does not mean they cannot be deployed for radical purposes). In a racially hegemonic society (that is, where relations, both social and deriving from capitalist production, are established along racial lines) the mulatto is mythic symbol of the hopeless division of two cultures: The races *must* be essentially incompatible for the underlying economic and social bases of segregation to remain mystified. Various doomed, tragic or fated, or vengeful and destructive (the mulatto obviously relates to other literary cultural types: the bastard son in Shakespeare for instance), s/he is a figure of taboo or tragedy who operates as a symbol of the costs of interracial sexual engagement.

Bogle uses the tragic mulatto throughout his work in several ways: as the cultural/literary type I have outlined here; as the "doomed, unfulfilled" character essayed by certain black actresses in films (who themselves are mulatta types in terms of racial characteristics) even when not technically mulatta characters (the most problematic use: the description certainly fits equally many Garbo heroines); and (if I read him correctly) as a metaphor for the frustrated careers of those same black actresses (he describes Dandridge as the "apotheosis of the tragic mulatto"). It is this last metaphorical function that I would like to appropriate and expand for an examination of black stardom in general. The contradictory cultural heritage of the mulatto parallels the conflicting interests to which the black star must respond.

The national interest that the black star occasionally serves is compounded by his/her relation to the black community: Lena Horne's stardom for instance owes as much to a bur-



Island in the Sun: on the set—Dorothy Dandridge with Patricia Owens and Joan Fontaine

geoning black bourgeoisie as it does to the political machinations of Hollywood. The dilemma surfaces in the cinema's infancy, even before black actors were uniformly employed to portray black characters, as has been amply documented: The release of Griffith's *Birth* (as well as subsequent re-releases and a proposed remake) provoked the organized protests of both blacks and liberal whites. Even before the emergence of the Hollywood black star as a cultural phenomenon, the political dilemma becomes clear: What strategies can be employed by the performer to remain a viable commodity within an industry with no sustained interest in radicalizing race relations, and remain simultaneously "a credit to [her] race" (as Dandridge explicitly aspired to be)? Again, this role resonates particularly for a black bourgeoisie concerned with "full integration" and the propagation of "correct" images that reflect this. (That this self-conscious concern with images also has an aspect of political urgency goes without saying: Griffith's promotion of negative black images and vigilante justice coincides, in 1915, with an increase in lynchings in the U.S.). It is the pressure arising from a nexus of contradictory interests that impacts heavily on the black star: The image we retain of Horne from the 1940s owes as much to the ambiguities of Hollywood's conflicted promotion of her as a glamorous/sexual icon (her bathtub number in *Cabin in the Sky* was excised as too risqué) as to her own sense of propriety and political responsibility (she earned the wrath of MGM when she bravely declined the role of a "flashy whore" in *St. Louis Woman*), as well as to the machinations of family friend and adviser Walter White of the NAACP.

With typical frankness, Horne in fact gives us the definitive statement on black stardom:

"The influential Negroes who advised me and helped me early in my career wanted me to be a symbol of Negro aspirations, and I accepted that role unwillingly and came, in time, to hate it, too. I was not strong enough to maintain myself inviolate beneath the symbol...As for the white man, he either advised me to forget the basic fact of my color and to pass or he urged me to exploit it, to be an exotic sexual symbol." (*Lena*, Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, Doubleday Inc. 1965).

Here she also notes explicitly Hollywood's own strategy for the specific promotion of the black *female* star. That Dandridge is promoted as a sex goddess (I will discuss her as such) is not merely a matter of her being attractive but of the particular type of beauty she exhibits. As Bogle notes (*Toms*, pp. 14-15) the color coding of black women in films begins as early as *Birth*: The dark-skinned mammy is non-sexual and nurturing, the lighter-skinned Lydia passionate and sexual, and almost every black glamour star (however briefly) has been of the latter type: a black woman who also meets European standards of beauty. One might even expand upon the mulatto metaphor here to describe certain post-war black stars (Dandridge, Poitier) who exhibit traits satisfying to a white bourgeois audience (Dandridge's beauty, Poitier's middle-classness). If Griffith used the mulatto (Lydia, Lynch) to demonstrate (through their destructiveness) the essential otherness of blackness, 50s Hollywood uses "mulatto" stars to assimilate blackness to the white audience.

Dandridge is the test case, the next logical step in the evolution of the black glamour star, her insertion into the text as romantic lead. Dandridge's emergence as star, however, foregrounds explosive cultural issues. As a star who is promoted (both in publicity and within the *mise-en-scène*) as sexually appealing to both blacks and whites she threatens a severe crisis in social relations by foregrounding the ideological basis of mystified race relations. The problem emerges with particular clarity in those films where she interacts with whites. The question becomes (as it later will in Poitier's 60s films) "Why (beyond racism) can't she who is sexually appealing to whites (or in Poitier's case exemplifies white values) interact textually with them?" The films' equivocation on this point (as in *Island in the Sun* where Dandridge is involved romantically with a white man but cannot express physical intimacy with him within the *mise-en-scène*) seriously threatens to undermine the apparent seamlessness of the narrative through its breach of narrative laws. In a similar fashion, her restriction to all-black narratives begs the same question in reverse: "Why, fulfilling the dominant cultural standards of beauty, is she segregated from whites?" (For obvious reasons the strategy employed for using Horne—iconic representation within the *mise-en-scène* but non-narrative status—becomes untenable as the civil rights movement develops)¹.

The political dilemma of the black star acquires a specifically sexual aspect for the female star, the problem being how

to remain a viable Hollywood commodity while not reinforcing dominant cultural sexual myths (i.e. the moral laxity and sexual availability of non-white women). The star's commodity status as sex goddess multiplies the opportunity not only for criticism from the various interest groups she serves but potentially provides a unique personal crisis, for she is just as likely to be burdened not only with her own sense of political responsibility and a deeply ingrained sense of bourgeois propriety but a specifically *black* bourgeois ideology which dictates its own proprieties for the sexual behavior of black women, particularly in relation to non-black men. This is certainly suggested in Horne's sense of propriety, and Dandridge's own ambivalence is reflected here:

"America was not geared to make me into a Liz Taylor, a Monroe, a Gardner. My sex symbolism was as a wanton, a prostitute, not as a woman seeking love and a husband, the same as other women." (Dorothy Dandridge, p. 400).

The point is not that elements in this observation can be contradicted, but the *self*-recrimination that Dandridge experienced as a result (at least in part) of her responsibility to several camps. The elements of sexual allure and pragmatism that I will examine as aspects of her screen persona (that often unite in the heroine's sexual pragmatism and have, I think, an obvious progressive political aspect in combating gender oppression) might have caused her personal distress but Dandridge never communicates a lack of dramatic responsiveness to the characters she portrays. That is her glory.

Hollywood's pragmatist

The following are aspects of the Dandridge persona which I consider the most dominant and culturally resonant. The list is not to be considered exhaustive.

SEXUAL ALLURE. Dandridge was a genuine sex goddess and whatever else this much-used term means it clearly indicates sexual allure as a primary focus of the star's commodification. The following quotation is characteristic of the publicity surrounding her nightclub and film appearances:

"This was one press conference I was not only intent upon attending but I was gonna make sure I grabbed the seat nearest Dandridge...Then Dorothy Dandridge came out of her boudoir and my hidden notebook felt like a slab of dry ice pressing against my rapidly beating chest bone. And my pencil felt like a live jackhammer...The little hairs on my neck felt like so many ice picks while the tongue I have used so many years to conduct marathon one-way conversations stuck to the roof of my mouth". (Quoted in *Dorothy Dandridge*, p.322)

The occasional element of leering (which she found increasingly distressing) in publicity surrounding her finally resulted in her contradicting it when she declared "I'm

1. The 1953 *Remains to be Seen* suggests MGM meant to continue this practice with Dandridge. She appears in a nightclub number as herself, singer "Dorothy Dandridge".

not fiery, I'm not earthy".

On screen she is repeatedly objectified both in appearance (In the 1960 *Malaga* she treks across Spain—on foot—in a tight skirt, peasant blouse and high heels) and in the *mise-en-scène*. Surprisingly, her bare feet are repeatedly subjected to the camera's fetishization and her introduction in *Tamango* testifies to both this practice and to her star status (through its deployment of the "star entrance"): She is introduced first as a bare pair of feet, then through a sheer drape (her image obliterated by bright sunlight) and then seated on the floor, her back to camera, finally turning to reveal herself as the film's star.

The personal ambivalence of the female star to her objectification has been amply documented in Hollywood histories and this operates (Monroe is the convenient reference point) even when the star has been complicit in her own objectification in the form of self-promotion (e.g. Dandridge's famous audition as Carmen Jones for Preminger). Like Monroe, Dandridge was able to realize on screen an authentic sensual presence which, as can be expected, operates at its most idiosyncratic level before repeated Hollywood fetishization. As an example I would cite the 1942 soundie ² *Cow Cow Boogie*. Here she is not the sexual object in isolation (as she often is) but the central figure within a group of attractive young women. Her performance of the title song reveals an engaging sexual presence, an unself-conscious sense of play and an infectious delight in the display of her own energies.

SOCIAL ALIENATION. This, I suppose, could be discussed as a continuation of her mulatto racial type: In *Island for instance* the two lighter-skinned blacks (Dandridge, Belafonte) are characterised as bourgeois in contrast to the black peasantry we see throughout the film (e.g. the black man who discovers a discarded wallet). In *Tamango* she is literally a mulatta (whose divided loyalties I will discuss shortly). In *Malaga* and *Murder Men* she is associated with the criminal underclass. Most interesting is *Carmen Jones* where her outsider status is given an *intra*racial class aspect. Carmen is associated with both an earlier black cultural world imbedded in mysticism (her grandmother is a fortune teller) and a modern world of sexual pleasure (the customers at Billy Pasteur's) in opposition to an aspiring black petit bourgeoisie (represented by Joe/Belafonte and Cindy Lou/Olga James) to whose values (hard work, faith in Christian providence, postponement of sexual pleasure, etc.) Carmen is a living, breathing affront. This seems a particularly audacious proposition in a civil rights era concerned with "correct" images and assimilation.

PRAGMATISM. I would propose this as the dominant character trait that unites her various roles. Increasingly oppressed by her lover in *Carmen Jones* she casually abandons him. Aware of her lover's criminal nature in *Malaga* she stashes away cash for the future. In *Island in the Sun* an interracial love affair also provides an opportunity for career advancement. As the recovering drug addict in *Murder Men* (1962) she turns again to drugs, fully aware of the legal ramifications for a parolee, when her efforts to reform are blocked.

These plot summations might suggest other qualities: opportunism, cynicism, even fatalism. Such assessments are countered by the ironic detachment Dandridge brings to her performances, detachment that betrays her full awareness of the social constraints under which she operates and acts to deflate conventional judgements. A comparison with another ironic star, the Dietrich of the Sternberg films, helps to make the point. In *Blonde Venus*, in fact, Dietrich realizes several of the qualities one might be tempted to ascribe to Dandridge. Early in the film Dietrich is the idealist/visionary, who maneuvers to impede her son's passage into patriarchal manhood by conniving to eliminate the father at a crucial Oedipal moment. Later she is literally fatalistic (threatening suicide) when the son is returned to the father. When we meet her again in Paris, she is the cynic, the inscription on her mirror a constant reminder to repress emotional response and "travel alone".

It is by and large the absence of idealism (or Sophia's romanticism in *The Scarlet Empress* or Madeleine's in *Shanghai Express* which, failing, transforms her into the notorious "Shanghai Lily") in the Dandridge persona that differentiates the two and, as the Sternberg films suggest, Dietrich's cynicism is the flip side of failed idealism. It is Dandridge's resilient emotional responsiveness (despite her ironic awareness) that counters the label "cynical". This often registers as a resilient humanity: In *Carmen Jones* she helps her oppressive lover elude the police because she can't bear to see anyone "cooped up"; in *Tamango* she aids the slaves who condemn her. But most often her humanity registers on the level of performance, particularly her overtly dramatic realization of emotional states, which again contrasts with Dietrich's underplaying of dramatic moments (her farewell at the depot in *Venus*).

One of the most satisfying expressions of her resilient humanity/irony is the wry commentary that pervades her films. One example must suffice. In *Murder Men*, emerging from prison where she has served a term for drug possession, she is greeted by the man who not only sent her up but now hopes to engineer her re-entry into society. Seeing his philanthropy for what it is (guilt), as well as the irony of the situation, she comments wryly, "Some service."

IDEALISM/ROMANTICISM. A reality-based woman is a potentially dangerous one: She might become a *femme fatale* as in *Carmen Jones*, a woman who appropriates some of the prerogatives of patriarchal manhood for her own purposes (as Carmen explicitly does in the "Dat's Love" segment, where she appropriates the position of sexual subject and the male becomes the object of desire). As is the habitual practice in popular narrative cinema Dandridge's transgressive potential is curbed by the textual incursion of romance (uniquely in *Tamango*, it is the incursion of a utopian political vision). The potential success of this conservative ploy is realized in *Malaga* where, transformed by love's redemptive powers, Dandridge abruptly becomes the voice of bourgeois morality, convincing her lover (Trevor Howard) not only to abandon his current criminal activities but to redeem himself by serving a prison sentence for past activities.

DEFIANCE/REBELLION. By emphasizing Dandridge's pragmatism I do not mean to imply that this is the ultimate solution to the forces that oppress her or that this exhausts possible responses to oppression.³ Her films repeatedly provide moments where she must confront oppression directly, which in turn provide both the film's and the actress's dramatic peaks. In *Tamango* (rich in such moments) she spits in the face of the slave who has condemned her as trash. In *Murder Men* she finally expels from her life the ex-husband whose ambiguous commitment to her only exacerbates her own ambiguous social position. The ending of *Carmen Jones* provides one of the most riveting examples in the cinema, when Carmen finally sings "No!" to her oppressive lover: the response so many woman's films suggest *would* be the heroine's response to the male's romantic imposition were it not for the culture's mystification of patriarchal gender relations as romantic love.

***Tamango* (1957): The limits of pragmatism**

(Inasmuch as the climactic events of this film will be revealed here, I would caution those unfamiliar with *Tamango* to read no further so as not to destroy the effectiveness of its conclusion, which I experienced as truly devastating. It is available on video through Ivy Classics, though not in its original wide screen format).

It is ironic that originally for this issue I had intended a comparison of Cukor's *The Marrying Kind* and John Berry's *From This Day Forward* (1946). I know very little about Mr. Berry although what I do know seems admirable. Blacklisted in 1951, he subsequently directed a documentary *The Hollywood Ten* to raise funds for HUAC victims before moving to France, subsequently working there and, later, again in U.S. films and television. (A chance encounter with Berry this summer at the showing of two of his films revealed him as friendly and open to conversation. Sadly, a proposed interview did not reach fruition). Of particular interest in the context of performance is Berry's collaboration with actors (he himself is an actor) and certain actors have realized some of their best work under his direction: Joan Fontaine in *From This Day Forward* (1946), John Garfield in *He Ran All the Way* (1951) (Garfield's final film and Berry's last Hollywood film for some time), the cast of *Claudine* (1974), Rosiland Cash in *Sister, Sister* (premiered 1982 on U.S. television). If I say that in *Tamango* Dandridge gives her finest performance it is doubtless attributable in part to the collaborative efforts of Mr. Berry.

Of Prosper Mérimée's short story, concerning a slave revolt on a ship bound from Africa, Berry (who also scripted) retains little (beyond names and certain plot points) save one crucial structuring device: the parallel development of the original's two male protagonists, the captain of the slave ship *Esperanza* and Tamango, the captured African and leader of the revolt. Berry complicates the relationship between exploiter and exploited for purposes beyond Mérimée's somewhat nihilistic vision, providing instead an examination of the terms of political commitment and the function of leadership in relation to political action. Rather than the original's larger-than-life monster (an African who himself trades in slaves

and unwittingly becomes contraband), Berry's Tamango is a renowned and respected warrior, one of six warriors captured with an entire village. As enacted by one Alex Cressan (reportedly a medical student at the time), Tamango is scarcely different from the Belafonte characters of earlier Dandridge films: a good-looking, well-meaning, politically focussed young bourgeois (in terms of his values rather than politics), who in terms of both his character and his cause (liberation) the audience easily accepts as hero. Berry complicates matters considerably by showing us the cost of his political commitment: Every act of rebellion he initiates results, unintentionally, in a *slave* death, while he himself (though subject to severe punishment) is protected from death by way of being a comparatively valuable commodity.

Cressan's simple characterization (his performance is compelling mainly because of the character's victimization) is countered by the captain's comparative psychological complexity as well as by the casting of Curt Jurgens, which guarantees a certain level of realization (as well as an element of European corruption). The villainy of the exploiter is, of course, a political given. Berry, however, characterizes the captain as capable of a humane concern for the slaves' welfare. This in turn is qualified by our knowledge that his "humanness" also derives from their being valuable cargo. His ambivalent humanity is an aspect of his ambiguous class position: As slave trader he is essentially a tool of bourgeois capitalism but he aspires to a comfortable marriage (to a wealthy merchant's daughter). His position as conveyor of human cargo relates symbolically to the class to which he aspires which historically both exploits humanity as labor and reduces interpersonal relationships to structures (e.g. the nuclear family). It becomes a crucial dramatic and thematic point whether his latent humanity will assert itself to avert disaster or be buried by his desire for power. It is not the least of the film's ironic parallels that, after a failed bid for freedom, Tamango holds the Dandridge character hostage within the slave quarters while the captain, finally realizing his love for her, refuses to fire upon the slaves.

To this equation Berry adds a third term, Aiche the mulat-

2. According to the programme accompanying the retrospective, Soundies are "brief films made specifically to be shown on a kind of 40s video juke-box". Soundies were shown as part of the retrospective.

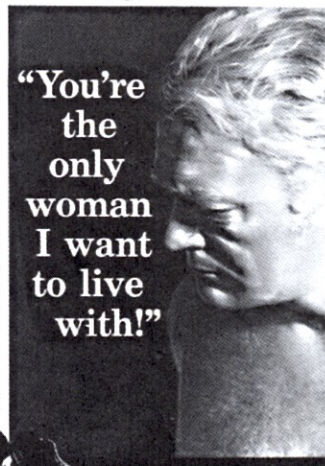
3. We might extend Dandridge's pragmatism beyond her persona to other areas. A programme of soundies and excerpted specialty numbers from musicals, included in the retrospective, presented Dandridge in her pre-stardom days. The soundies often blatantly reproduced black stereotypes at their most offensive. Bogle's biography also notes that Dandridge played her share of demeaning roles during this phase. The soundies/specialties also support arguments that, as an attractive black woman, Dandridge was automatically characterized as 'loose'. In these musical numbers she repeatedly (though not exclusively) appears in the sexually incongruous costumes that 40s audiences seem to have associated with working-class white women or women of colour. Here, without the benefit of narrative or character development, she merely reflects the stereotype. But even this simplifies matters. One of her most startling appearances is in the soundie *Easy Street*. Here the filmmakers apparently associate 'easy' with 'the easiest way' (i.e. prostitution). Dandridge is clearly kept by the gross man she accompanies, who displays her as one of his possessions. What is remarkable is that already she displays elements to be developed in the later films: a casual acceptance of the situation mixed with world-weary resolve, an aspect of her persona increasingly evidenced in the post-Carmen Jones performances.

DOROTHY DANDRIDGE CURT JURGENS



"I've
always
hated
your
hands
on me!"

AN
ADVENTURE
AS BOLD
AND DARING
AS THE
CASTING!



"You're
the
only
woman
I want
to live
with!"



CINEMASCOPE

JEAN SERVAIS • ROGER HANIN • and introducing ALEX CRESSAN • directed by JOHN BERRY • a VITALITE Presentation
• a HAL ROACH Release • in COLOR by MOVIE LAB

ta (Dandridge), mistress to the captain but a slave like the Africans, equally removed from the white world (although the captain's mistress, she sleeps on the floor) and the black (for her sexual transgression she is designated by the slaves "trash"). Berry makes expressive use of Dandridge's position as American star among a non-American cast: In look, bearing, and accent (resolutely black American) she remains an alien presence.

Never before or after would Dandridge's pragmatism be given the racial political aspect that it has here. Her acceptance of the realities of race relations positions her between the political visionary Tamango and the opportunist captain, and qualifies both positions. In contrast to Tamango's commitment (which, as noted, results in several deaths) Aiche's "collaboration" with white power allows her to intercede at critical moments, to offer aid to the slaves as well as to avert their punishment. This, as well as her attempts to instruct the Africans on strategies for survival in the white world, is an

aspect of her resilient humanity, which as noted earlier counteracts the assessment of Dandridge's persona as cynical. In contrast to the opportunism of the whites (the ship's doctor also seeks to gain her favors) her pragmatic collaboration is a matter of survival: When she attests that the captain treats her like a "white woman", the body scars she reveals (resulting from the whippings and brandings inflicted by former owners) give us a more precise definition of what her allegiance to a white man (who has never beaten her) means.

It is her position as a *female* slave that defines our critical view of masculine leadership (she no sooner warns a fellow female of her potential sexual exploitation by white men than the woman is accosted and fondled by the ship's bosun). Berry's critique in fact suggests nothing less than the Hitchcock of *Notorious* and *North by Northwest* (like Bergman in the former, Dandridge's acquisition of a key is crucial to the political maneuvers of both men). Like Hitchcock's presentation of the power plays between the representatives of a

democracy (where all *men* are created equal) and its enemies, Berry shows that Woman's position is politically undefined and that she functions merely as a tool for interests that are predominantly masculine. The fight between the two males leads inevitably to a battle for power over Aiche and both men are fully implicated in her reduction to political tool. The night before the planned revolt, Aiche is to acquire the captain's key to release the slaves from their chains, with the clear implication that she will have to bestow her sexual favours to succeed. When a fellow notes the light in Tamango's eyes at the mention of Aiche's name, the freedom-fighter contradicts the inference and responds, "I'm thinking about tomorrow". At the same time the captain, to ensure Aiche's loyalty, promises to make her a free woman and document it in writing. Unable to read the document but fully able to recognize the word "freedom", Aiche discovers the captain has in fact lied to her. In one of several dramatic high points centred on her presence, Dandridge responds with a torrent of deflating insults and retorts (among which is the famous line used to advertise the film, "I've always hated your hands on me!"). Aiche's intensity testifies to Dandridge's great dramatic skills and the theme of female oppression crystallizes at this point: If slavery means something far more personally oppressive to the female slave, freedom is that much more intensely desired.

That Berry inevitable supports the slaves's efforts is never in doubt. The narrative charts the slaves' fluctuating commitment, which is also commitment to the *type* of leadership Tamango encompasses at any given moment. In one of the cinema's greatest depictions of group or collaborative efforts (one might compare any number of moments in *Hawks*) the slaves successfully hide the body of the sadistic bosun (an action that comes to involve even non-verbal communication between male and female quarters) whom Tamango has killed with his bare hands. The slaves had earlier turned against Tamango not only because of the loss of lives but because they had been cowed by the apparent invincibility of the whites. Successfully eluding detection, they signal their renewed allegiance by offering their chains to Tamango, who possesses a stolen file. Their allegiance is not only in response to his intense commitment but signals their recognition of their own latent powers. But Tamango does not request their loyalty, it is given voluntarily.

It is this last factor that I would posit as the film's political essence: Effective political action is ultimately dependent upon the *personal* commitment of the individuals involved. Leadership's sensitivity to the prerogatives of the individual, in turn, becomes the criterion by which the *quality* of leadership is judged as well as, ultimately, the leader's humanity. The failure of the slave revolt leads to a standoff between the two factions, the slaves forced back into the hole of the ship (with the captive Aiche) with the crew threatening above. The crew, an exemplary oppressed labour force, threatens mutiny if the captain does not fire the ship's cannon into the hole (compare the cannon as symbol of white power to the tanks in *Camp de Thiaroye* thirty years later). Their allegiance having been defined as a matter of impersonal relations

(deriving both from the captain's tyranny and meagre monetary reward), the crew logically demand the captain's personal disinterest in his handling of the slaves (they complain he risks their lives "for a slave girl"). Meanwhile the slaves, signalling their deeply personal renewed commitment, have taken a blood oath ("Brothers in life, brothers in death"). In one the most stirring moments in cinema (and Cressan's dramatic peak) Tamango tearfully acknowledges the rights of the individual, releasing both the slaves from their oath and the hostage Aiche from captivity, although he himself pledges to die before submitting to slavery. His fellows in turn recommit to his vision, acknowledging their solidarity with a defiant chant in their native language, their voices swelling on the soundtrack. The captain fires.

The power of these final moments derives from both their dramatic content (compare the execution of the nuns at the conclusion of *Dialogues of the Carmelites*) and their "summing up" of the film's political content: Tamango ensures his humanity, in the face of death, with his release of Aiche, while the captain, in his bid to retain power, in essence kills his humanity, the final judgement upon him rendered by the cannon's repositioning itself (after the fatal blast) to face *him*. But our final complex response derives largely from Berry's use of Aiche and Dandridge's dramatic presence. The ending provides a joining of several components of her screen persona (here the juxtaposition of world-weary resolve and defiance) and her performance style: It is a *locus classicus* of her art. Granted her freedom by Tamango (and having had her freedom finally documented by the captain), the camera follows Aiche/Dandridge as she walks among the slaves to freedom (Berry capturing the familiar Dandridge knitted brow and tragic eyes), nonetheless moved by their solidarity. At the very last moment she turns and rejoins them (which by now guarantees her death). Taking her place among the slaves, she slowly deciphers their chant and, at first haltingly and then defiantly, begins to chant in what is for her a foreign tongue. It is a supreme rendering of the awakening of political awareness which, here, is also an awakening to racial solidarity in the face of tyranny. But we are never permitted to forget the particular loss that solidarity entails for the female slave: Berry's camera follows Aiche/Dandridge (the only female in the male quarters) just before her death, as she sinks slowly and inexorably to the ground.

All students of black entertainment owe a debt to Donald Bogle for his lifelong commitment to the subject. This article is dedicated to him.

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by Peter E.S. Babiak

A Few Short Notes on Robert Mitchum

THE ARTICLE YOU ARE ABOUT TO READ FINDS

its genesis in the autumn of 1984 with myself firmly planted in front of my television, beer in one hand and smoke in the other. David Lean's film *Ryan's Daughter* was about to begin, featuring Robert Mitchum as an Irish schoolteacher. Having heard from many people that Mitchum was an actor of what is politely referred to as an "extremely limited range", I was looking forward with anticipation to a pleasant evening's sneering and jeering at Mitchum's ineptitude in this role. Robert Mitchum disappointed me that night by being very good. The next time I saw my friend David Porter I asked him what he thought about Robert Mitchum. Dave stated that he loathed the set of values which Mitchum's star persona represented, but had to admit that he had given quite a good performance in *Ryan's Daughter*. I mentioned Robert Mitchum to another friend of mine whose opinion I respected. Her position was unequivocal: Robert Mitchum was a no-talent hack she had no use for.

Because of his physical size, deep voice, and rugged features, it was almost a foregone conclusion in the classical Hollywood period that Robert Mitchum would be typecast in "heavy" roles. Mitchum's approach to the roles he played, however, was always well integrated—relying on nuances of voice, body movement, and facial expression which in and of themselves did not seem especially remarkable, but when taken in the context of the entire performance in question rarely failed to create stable, believable, and consistent characterizations. In his cumulative body of work, Mitchum delivered consistently fine performances in such a variety of roles that I am forced to conclude that he was a highly underrated actor who rarely was given roles that were worthy of the considerable degree of skill that he brought to them. The following is a discussion of four occasions in which Mitchum was given a role worthy of his talent.

Considering the implications of narrative complexity on

an individual actor's performance, the challenge posed to Mitchum by Charles Laughton's film *Night of the Hunter* must have seemed staggering. Here is a film that can be read all at once as a religious allegory, a Brother's Grimm style fairy-tale, and a depiction of family violence codified by an era that lacked the public discourse necessary to deal with this subject matter. The "Reverend" Harry Powell, then, becomes all at once the angel of death, the bogey-man (to borrow a turn of phrase from Steven King), and a sexual psychopath. Mitchum's response to this challenge was to create a performance that was overstated just enough to accommodate these demands while holding himself in check just enough to make the character believable. The result of this delicate balancing act is that the audience never loses sight of the fact that Harry Powell is a dangerous psychopath, although we do understand how the characters in the film are taken in by his charisma.

The film provides us with privileged information about Harry Powell from the onset. The introductory narration warns us to beware of false prophets who come in sheep's clothing, but who are ravenous wolves underneath. This warning is connected through editing to the discovery of a murdered woman. Compared to this, our first introduction to Harry Powell in the flesh, as it were, is almost banally naturalistic. We see him driving away from the scene of his latest murder engaged in a one-sided conversation with God. Mitchum's performance here is actually quite understated—Powell's tone of voice is sincere and intimate as he thanks God for continuing to look after him. The only thing that draws attention to Powell's psychosis here is Mitchum's clever use of eyelines—Powell occasionally glances quickly at the sky as he talks to God as you or I would glance quickly at a passenger in our own car as we drive down the highway. Powell then becomes angry as he reflects on the sexuality of the women he has been murdering. His face twists into a



Robert Mitchum in the 1950s.

scowl, and his voice begins to sound like an articulate growl through which the words are emerging. An abrupt cut then presents us with Powell's reaction as he watches a burlesque queen. His fists clench and the scowl has become an expression of unmitigated fury. In one of cinema's greatest double entendres Powell reaches into his pocket and flips open his switchblade knife, which tears through his clothing and protrudes out from the torn material.¹

Powell's mesmerizing preacher facade is first depicted to us as he tries to pump Ben Harper for information concerning the whereabouts of the stolen money. Powell's tone is authoritative as he tries to convince Harper that salvation lies in giving the money to the Lord. When Harper questions Powell as to the authenticity of his credentials, Powell's lips become drawn and his stare becomes intense as he states "I preach the religion that the Lord and I worked out betwixt us". The effect of this is quite menacing, and within the context of Mitchum's performance serves to inextricably link in the mind of the audience the facade of the mesmerizing preacher to the reality of the dangerous psychopath that hides beneath it.

Mitchum allows his performance to go completely over the top at two points in the film. The first of these is as Powell, after having found that the money is hidden in Pearl's doll, chases John and Pearl to the river. He lumbers up the basement stairs clutching after the children. They slam the door on his hand and he lets out a low roar. As he chases them through the brush at the river's edge he slashes at the branches with his switchblade. In a last attempt to get at the children he runs into the river up to his chest. Realizing that they have escaped him, he lets out a piercing roar. Similarly, when shot by the widow at the film's conclusion, he yelps and screams like a hyena as he scurries out of the kitchen and hops over the fence to hide in the barn. Mitchum's character is literally presented as an animal at these two points in the film. Throughout the bulk of the film, he is presented as charismatic albeit undeniably dangerous.

Those moments of charm and charisma lie at the other extreme of the continuum on which this performance is based. During the ice cream parlor scene in which Powell pumps Ruby for information concerning the whereabouts of John and Pearl he is at his most seductive—gazing intently at Ruby as she eats her ice cream, while telling her that she is the prettiest little thing that he has ever laid eyes upon in a soft, confident, tone that has no hint of condescension or sarcasm. Once given the information he is looking for, however, his dangerous side resurfaces. As a teenage boy notices Powell's display of sexual interest in Ruby, Powell again reaches his hand into his pocket and opens his switchblade. Although this character is capable of charm and guile, his capacity for destruction is never far away.

Where the "Reverend" Harry Powell's defining characteristic seems to be some form of sexually sadistic rage, Max Cady's defining characteristic, as depicted in J. Lee Thompson's *Cape Fear*, seems to be a sociopathic glee derived from the manipulation and domination of other

people. Max Cady is also very openly sexual and very open about his enjoyment of his sexuality. When we first see Cady confidently strolling toward the courthouse for his first confrontation with Sam Bowden, Cady quite openly "checks out" and leers at the women he passes on his way. As Cady enters the courthouse, he notices a man watching him. Cady stares him down, and proceeds to the parking lot, timing his arrival to coincide with Bowden's settling into his own car. Cady reaches into the driver's window and snatches the keys out of Bowden's hand before Bowden has a chance to realize what is going on. Throughout this initial confrontation no direct threat is made to Bowden. Cady's relaxed, confident, and bemused manner—combined with the quality he seems to possess for effortlessly dominating whatever situation he finds himself in is what we find quite menacing. Like Harry Powell, Max Cady in many ways is presented as a kind of animal. However, where Harry Powell uses a charming facade to cover up a ravenous beast, Max Cady uses no similar deception. He is as he appears—a clever, predatory, stalker.

When brought in for a strip search due to his harassment of Bowden, Cady's demeanor is never anything but confident and self-assured. We are here made aware that Cady is extremely intelligent through his declaration that he has studied law in prison combined with his uncanny ability at manipulating the legal system to achieve his own ends. His insistence that he is being cooperative is in itself an act of defiance, for implicit in this cooperation is Cady's knowledge that the law cannot touch him as long as he is being cooperative. Mitchum also makes a point of flexing his chest muscles as Cady is strip searched, making us aware that Cady's intelligence is matched by his physical power. The combined effect of Mitchum's relaxed manner with all of these other factors is to make the audience believe that Cady has everyone else in the film in the palm of his hand.

Cady also changes his demeanor to suit the dynamics of whatever situation he finds himself in. When he files his own harassment complaint against Bowden, Mitchum presents Cady almost as a pouting child. As Cady's lawyer chastises Bowden Cady's head is slightly bowed, his lower lip is slightly protruded, and he occasionally blinks his eyes. Throughout the course of this scene, as it becomes apparent that Cady has outsmarted Bowden both literally and legally, Cady's head raises and he looks at Bowden directly with a soft smile. Bowden mentions the fact that Cady could not have known that the Bowden household was under police surveillance if he hadn't gone there to see it for himself, however, and Cady's eyes widen as his smile disappears. His general demeanor continues to remain confident, though, and he still appears to be enjoying the game although his bluff has been called for the time being.

Mitchum's characterization of Max Cady is most remarkable during those scenes which take place around the houseboat on the Cape Fear river at the film's conclusion. The notion of Cady as a predatory animal is literally represented by Mitchum here as he peers through the reeds at the bank of the river, watching the houseboat. Cady stalks the



Charles Laughton's
*The Night of the
Hunter* (1995)



deputy assigned to watch the houseboat by half crawling, half slithering into the water so as not to make any splashing noise. He then silently creeps up behind the deputy, chokes him, and forces him under the water. Cady softly and enthusiastically speaks to the man while he is killing him, and then contemptuously grins while patting the corpse on the back. He then proceeds to the houseboat, where he physically dominates Bowden's wife in an attempt to gain her consent to sexual intercourse with him by agreeing in return not to rape her daughter. Cady becomes angry and beats her when she refuses to submit to his will. Cady then confronts Bowden's daughter, who holds a fireplace poker in front of herself to ward him off. He stares her down for a moment, and then simply reaches out and takes the poker from her.

Cady's use of violence seems to stem from his need to dominate and manipulate others at all costs—a need which he directs all of his intellectual and physical strength to the satisfaction of. This will to power, which makes Cady's character so lethal, is conversely also what causes him to become so quickly resigned to death after being shot by Bowden. Death, to Cady, is a much more viable option than the prospect of a life devoid of the opportunity to dominate others. The final utterance we hear from Cady is the slight groan and whimper that he lets out when he realizes that he is going to spend the rest of his life in prison, and our final vision of him is as he lies motionless and powerless as Bowden trains a gun at him.

Although undeniably valuable assets in creating powerful, manipulative characters the likes of Harry Powell and Max Cady, Mitchum's physical size, rugged features, and deep voice would seemingly ensure that an audience could never consider him in the role of a soft spoken, gentle, Irish schoolteacher. Mitchum plays this role quite beautifully in

Ryan's Daughter, however, and his accent rarely slips. Where the previously discussed characterizations were consistent and stable, Mitchum here creates a characterization of a man who, through a great personal catastrophe, grows from a persona that is extremely self-effacing and awkward to a persona possessed of a quiet strength and dignity, combined with a great compassion for others.

The initial impressions we are given of Charles Shaughnessy all portray him as extremely awkward. We first see him as he strolls along the beach having just returned from a trip to Dublin. Rose approaches him, obviously happy to see him. By way of greeting, he softly says "Well Rose, this is nice". He tips his hat to her and the wind blows it away. He chases his hat and drops his umbrella. As they walk along the beach to the schoolhouse he does not acknowledge the fact that she is blatantly coming on to him—rather, he continues to relate details of his trip to her in a soft voice while occasionally politely nodding to her. He pretends not to notice how upset she is by his remark that "Some young man's going to be a lucky fella". At the schoolhouse, Rose confesses that she loves him. His movements and speech are awkward and stilted—he picks at his fingers, blinks shyly, and doesn't look her in the eye. He also tends to stand with his head bowed and with his shoulders stooped when he's around her.

¹ The film's greatest moment occurs when Lillian Gish sits on her porch singing the counterpoint to the rendition of "Leaning" that Mitchum is singing as he sits on her fence. This is one of the most hair-raising moments that I have ever witnessed committed to film.

During the marriage ceremony, Charles's hand trembles as he places the ring on Rose's finger. At the reception, he is obviously not enjoying himself very much and is intimidated by the rowdiness of the crowd. When the crowd gets out of control, however, it is Charles who extricates Rose and Michael from the situation. When Charles goes upstairs to be with Rose he enters the bedroom shyly, batting his eyes. He kisses Rose gently and strokes her hair. She tries to pull him to her, but he retreats behind a screen and very methodically takes off his clothes and puts on a long nightshirt. He approaches the bed stiffly, obviously embarrassed. He then lies in bed beside Rose, gently kissing her and stroking her hair. They make love—Charles reaching climax in less than two minutes. He then kisses Rose tenderly on the cheek and hand while stroking her hair, and asks her if she's all right. He then rolls over to go to sleep. We are then provided with images of Charles and Rose as they lie in bed on their wedding night, facing away from each other. They both have their eyes open. Rose is disappointed with her wedding night, and Charles knows that he is the one who has disappointed her.

Up to this point in the film, Charles has been presented as extremely gentle, but also as uncomfortable with sexuality and as somewhat unimaginative. The arrest of O'Leary at the beach, however, demonstrates that Charles is also capable of extreme strength of character. Rose's lover, Dorian, collapses due to shell shock after shooting O'Leary. Rose instinctively moves to him, and they look at each other. The villagers begin to laugh as they realize that the rumors about Rose and Dorian are substantiated. Charles gently takes Rose's arm, says "Come", and calmly leads her back to the schoolhouse, walking with great dignity and poise. His dev-

astation is merely suggested by the expression on his face.

Although Charles loses his self-effacing manner at this point in the film, he is never presented as anything but a very gentle man. When they reach the schoolhouse, Charles sits opposite Rose, looks directly at her, and softly tells her that he has known about her affair from the beginning and has hoped that she would come back to him. His statements are now calm, direct, and concise, as they are later when he tells Rose that he has decided to leave her. He also still expresses concern about what Rose's plans for the future are, and is sensitive to her in his manner. As they leave the schoolhouse for the last time, Rose appears regretful. Charles says, calmly but directly, "Not all your doin', Rosie, I should never have married you". As he and Rose take their final stroll through the town, Charles's stride is calm, purposeful, and dignified. Rose shudders at the ghastly silence which signifies that the villagers have now completely ostracized them. Charles notices this, and gently but firmly says "Take my arm". Once they are beyond the limits of the village, the villagers emerge from their homes and begin to whistle and jeer at Charles and Rose. Rose begins to cry, but Charles never loses his calm and dignified expression.

Whereas Mitchum's performance in *Ryan's Daughter* represents the most radical departure from star persona discussed here, his performance in *Farewell, My Lovely* is the performance that most closely conforms to that persona. As Philip Marlowe, Mitchum is constrained by the archetype of the "hard-boiled" detective. We first see Marlowe as he stares blankly out of a hotel room window, wearing a fedora, smoking a cigarette. Throughout the course of the film Mitchum delivers a voice-over narration in a fluid monotone. Predominantly sardonic and occasionally sarcastic, this



Ryan's Daughter (1970) Robert Mitchum and Sarah Miles

voice-over narration establishes Marlowe's disenchantment and disillusionment with the world that he finds himself in. Outside of this narration, however, the thrust of Mitchum's performance is to establish a character who delights in his relationships with other human beings. Marlowe is also presented as capable of a wide range of relations with other people in the film. For example, the voice-over narration announces Marlowe's first meeting with Jessie Florian with the phrase "A bottle of bourbon could be my best friend". When actually dealing with and relating to Jessie Florian, however, Marlowe is courteous, polite, and seems to take a genuine interest in her reminiscences. As they sing together, his manner becomes relaxed and warm. Where the voice-over narration portrays Marlowe as a tough detective after information, the diegesis of the film presents us with one human being relating warmly to another.

The characterization finds its emotional center in the relationship between Marlowe and Tommy Rae's kid. When Marlowe first questions Tommy Rae, he and the kid toss a ball back and forth between them and smile at each other. As Marlowe leaves the apartment, the kid runs after him shouting "Hey Mister". Marlowe squats down so that his face will be at the kid's eye level. The kid asks "Are you a policeman"? In a mock-serious tone, Marlowe replies "No, are you a policeman"? The kid says "No, I'm a baseball player". Marlowe's tone becomes warm and enthusiastic as he says "A baseball player". He then gently takes the kid by the hand and goes with him back to Rae's apartment. Later, when Marlowe returns to Rae's apartment for Velma's picture, he and the kid again toss the ball back and forth to one another. Marlowe and the kid again are playing around with each other as Marlowe learns that Tommy Rae has disappeared. The kid asks Marlowe "Is my daddy coming back"? The playful expression disappears from Marlowe's face and his eyes wander back and forth from side to side, as he realizes what has probably happened to Tommy Rae and wishes he could somehow make it better for the kid.

Mitchum makes all of the wide range of interpersonal relationships that Marlowe becomes involved in through the course of the film appear quite believable. During his initial interview with Lindsay Marriott, Marlowe's behavior runs the gamut from skepticism to mild contempt to outright disbelief as he asks "You just want me to go along and hold your hand"? Marriott expresses indignation at Marlowe's manner, at which point Marlowe's expression softens. Marlowe then chuckles and in a bemused voice softly says, "Well, I get a lot of complaints about that". Marlowe closes the interview with the comment "I like your name too", delivered in a reassuring tone, as if to apologize for his rough treatment of Marriott.

During the sequence in which Marlowe is imprisoned in Amthor's brothel Mitchum has no dialogue or monologue to work with. His performance here relies solely on the voice-over narration, facial expressions, and body movements, and is extremely effective in its depiction of Marlowe's effort to shake off the effect of the narcotics that Amthor has injected him with. His movements are slow and drunken as he crawls out of the bed and pulls himself along the floor to the door of

the room. His legs tremble and his heels pivot as he paces the length of the room trying to work the narcotics through his system. As he staggers in to Amthor's office to confront her his body sways and his spine sags. Mitchum's performance here is neither overstated nor understated; it is entirely believable.

In *Farewell, My Lovely*, Mitchum manages to remain faithful to the archetype of the "hard-boiled" detective while at the same time broadening it to create a character who is largely driven by the need for human affiliation. Where the voice-over narration establishes Marlowe's disillusioned, cynical side, the material presented—in the way Marlowe laughs and hugs Georgie when he visits the newsstand, in the way Marlowe gives Moose a few dollars for his date with Velma, and in the way Marlowe reacts warmly and happily when Mrs. Grayle asks him for a date—depicts Marlowe as a character capable of the full range of human relationships and interactions.

This brief overview of four performances in the entire body of work achieved by Robert Mitchum in the context of a career that spanned over five decades is not intended to be considered as either exhaustive or definitive. It is intended to illustrate that Robert Mitchum was a highly skilled performer who, given the constraints of the classical Hollywood period, achieved a remarkably diverse variety of characterizations. None of the characterizations discussed here could have been achieved by an actor who approached his craft as if the parts were simply cut out of a mold. Rather, all of these characterizations are believable in terms of their individual psychological characteristics as portrayed by Mitchum. Harry Powell is a sexual psychopath, Max Cady an amoral sociopath. Charles Shaughnessy is a gentle, yet quietly strong man, and Philip Marlowe seeks to affiliate with others in a world which he has become disillusioned and disenchanted with. The sheer diversity of these characterizations, coupled with the fact that Mitchum is quite convincing in all of these rolls, indicates that Robert Mitchum was an actor of great skill and versatility who was underappreciated in the classical Hollywood period.

For the first time in thirteen years, I find myself writing a piece of critical work that is not intended to conform to any specific academic agenda. Usually, this would be the paragraph in which I would discuss the larger implications of my conclusions for our understanding of film criticism or the classical Hollywood period. I feel it more appropriate, however, to conclude by briefly returning to this article's genesis. After that discussion in the autumn of 1984, David Porter and I discussed Robert Mitchum on at least four other occasions. Dave never really changed his opinion of Robert Mitchum. He always felt that Mitchum's star persona represented a set of values that he was personally opposed to, and felt that in *Ryan's Daughter* Mitchum had perhaps unwittingly stumbled onto his one redeeming performance. My ongoing discussion with Dave on this topic is now ended. Like Robert Mitchum, David Porter died this year.

This article is dedicated to Dave's memory, with love and gratitude.

a tribute to **JAMES STEWART**



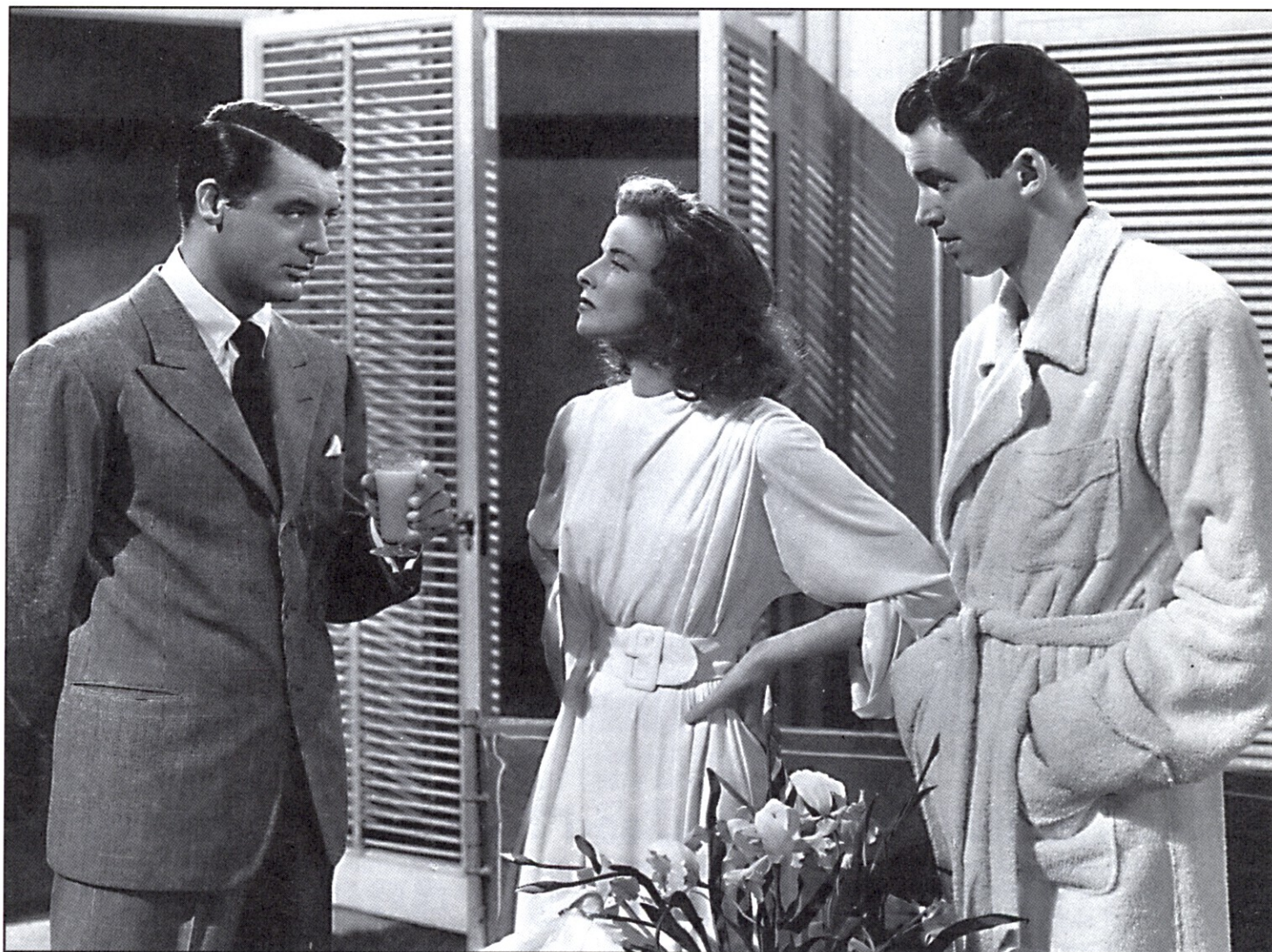
The Shop Around the Corner (1940)

Rear Window (1954)



Jimmy Stewart was one of America's most beloved stars.

Stewart's popular image has always depended on a select group of films, particularly his work for Frank Capra. A film like *It's a Wonderful Life* illustrates the range of Stewart's acting skills as he moves effortlessly from youthful idealism through middle age anger and despair to attain, in a Capraesque manner, a kind of rebirth and salvation. The emphasis on the Capra films has tended to overshadow the remarkable body of work he did for Anthony Mann and Alfred Hitchcock, who both fully developed the potential for hysteria in Stewart's persona, already evident as early as *After the Thin Man*. Even less often acknowledged are his achievements in Ernst Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner*, George Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story* and Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder*. The Preminger film is particularly fascinating because of the way Stewart employs his screen image and persona. Here, Stewart masterfully creates a characterization which incorporates his familiar 'small-town/nice guy' image with that of a worldly, sly and morally pragmatic lawyer. The cynicism present in this characterization is, in turn, skilfully utilized by John Ford in *Two Rode Together*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Cheyenne Autumn* in which Stewart wryly played a corrupt Wyatt Earp. Stewart's awareness of his screen image and ability to play with expectations is evident in these late films and, to his credit, he consistently manages to deliver complex, compelling performances which surprise and delight the viewer. The longevity and breadth of Stewart's career is amazing. Jimmy Stewart's talent, star image on and off the screen and filmic presence fulfil the finest potentials of the classical sound cinema. — *The Editors*



The Philadelphia Story (1940)

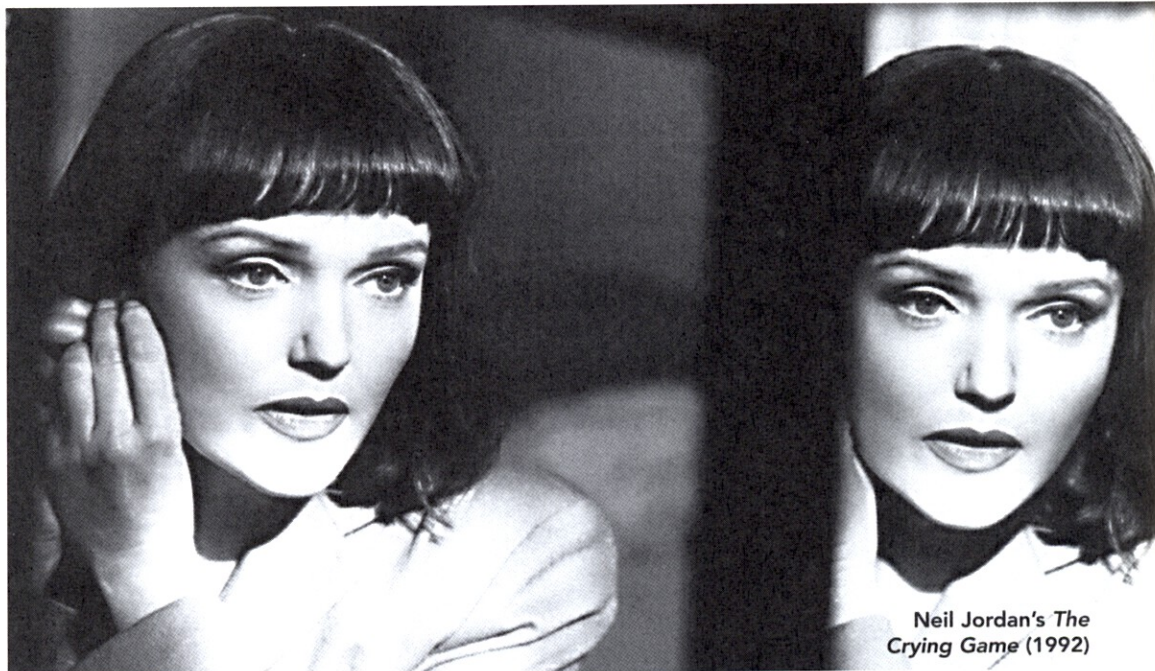
The Naked Spur (1953)



The Anatomy of a Murder (1959)



AN INTERVIEW WITH **MIRANDA RICHARDSON**
by **Carole Zucker**



Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992)

British Film, Stage, and Television Performance: Training, Praxis, and Culture

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BRITISH AND American acting was a recurrent issue in my 1995 book, *Figures of Light: Actors and Directors Illuminate the Art of Film Acting* (Plenum/Da Capo). Some of the comments made by the American actors were:

"What we're great at is this kind of organic, shoot-from-the-hip, react-off-the-other-person, casual arena of acting. What we're not so good at is the control—voice work, interpretation, clarity, being able to use the text...It's what the English are so good at, and why we love their theater."—Lindsay Crouse

"It's a very complicated relationship between the British actor and the American actor. There's a kind of mutual envy and a mutual inferiority complex. American actors tend to think the Brits are the great stage actors, and the Brits tend to think the Americans are the ones who act truly from the guts."—John Lithgow

The implications of these statements are that British actors are technically proficient, but somehow—compared to Americans—lack raw emotional power. Through repetition, this generalized and rather clichéd view of British and American performance has taken on the status of truth. Unfortunately, such statements do not begin to account for the vigor, authority, complexity, and emotional depth of performances by British actors.

Acting is largely an art of self-portraiture, and actors are universally required to draw on their personal resources—emotional, mental, physical and spiritual—to develop and enact an interpretation. The route taken to formulate and express that interpretation will vary from performer to performer. In British actor training, where technical excellence and control is stressed, notions concerning self-revelation and access to emotional truths will undoubtedly depart from the more visceral, direct American

approach. British performance is undoubtedly more “text-based,” whereas American acting is normally more dependent on behavior.

After visiting the major British drama schools (RADA, LAMDA, Central School, East 15, etc.), I began to interview working actors for a follow-up book on British performance. I spoke with alumni from each of these main schools, to explore their impressions and ideas about their training, and how their initial training has effected them as performers. I expect these interviews to shed some light on the relationship of classical British training to the actor’s creative process.

The discussions with actors revolve around a variety of issues. We speak in detail about their training, their preparation for a role, how much research they do, how they deal with different elements of characterization (physical, emotional, psychological), what their relationships are like with fellow actors (e.g. how closely they discuss the process they are involved in, how much they rely on the other actor for inspiration, etc.), the relationship they develop with different directors, varying approaches to rehearsal, and the concept of ensemble playing. We also discuss the actor’s ideas about “the Method” and differences between American and British acting. The interviews have also involved ruminations on the British character, and how this might influence the nature of British performance style. There is also the curious fact that British actors, no matter how highly valorized, prefer to be thought of as “ordinary blokes.” It is a factor that no doubt emerges from the British class system. The sense that acting is “just a job” makes the actors’ role in Britain quite distinct from his/her counterpart in the U.S., where performers acquire a rather special status in society.

The following is an extract of an interview with Miranda Richardson took place at the Edinburgh Festival in the Summer of 1996, where she was performing the lead (and only) role in the first English language production of Robert Wilson’s adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s book, *Orlando*. Richardson trained at the Bristol Old Vic Theater School, and has worked extensively in film, theater, and television. For the interview, I chose to focus mainly on two films, her first *Dance with a Stranger* (1985) and a more recent work, *Tom and Viv* (1994). I find that focusing more closely on a few works is more informative than a career overview approach. Richardson is known in the British press as “Ms. Sourpuss,” because of her unwillingness to speak with the press, and her general refusal to do publicity for her films, or attend social functions with her peers. While I would not say Richardson was a welcoming presence, I admire her determination to remain independent, and unfettered by the expectations of others.

CAROLE ZUCKER: Tell me how you ended up studying at The Bristol Old Vic Theater School.

MIRANDA RICHARDSON: I took my exams [in secondary school] early and then moved to Bristol and worked there because it was the only opportunity of getting a grant for drama school. I wasn’t going to get a grant from where I was [near Liverpool], which was partly why I don’t care about

going back. They’re cretins, really, this discretionary grant system which was constantly raising its head. I get so many letters every week from students saying “I’m doing six jobs, and I’ve got to pay my fees and I don’t know how.”¹

CZ: I visited the Bristol Old Vic Theater School and attended some classes. A lot of students told me that they were working at Safeway all night and then coming to classes all day.

MR: Yes, but there’s a perverse romance about it at the time, you’ve got energy to do certain things. I remember at the end of the day, looking at my watch because I had a cleaning job to go to. And Nat Brenner who was running the school then, and knew immediately if your attention wasn’t completely there, noticed me looking uneasy, and I said “I’m really sorry, I’m going to have to go now because I’ll be late for my cleaning job,” and he said “Well, cleanliness is next to godliness, so please go ahead.” He was very understanding, very good about that. All these silly prizes that have names to them, grants given to the school; he would always deal them out to the people who were the most needy.

CZ: Did your parents encourage you to go to drama school?

MR: They didn’t discourage me. I think they were worried, like anyone would be. I did this ridiculous secretarial course for something to fall back on, which actually got me a job before I went to drama school, which meant I could earn some money. But there was never any intention of that being a career. Actors are always saying “Got a job? When’s your next job?” Anything in the pipeline?” No one ever takes anything for granted, because it might stop.

CZ: When did you know that you wanted to be an actor?

MR: Probably around seventeen. I think I still thought I was going to go to university and study either English or drama there. As the practical became more important to me, I didn’t see why I was going to university. So many people, if they have the education, go on to university as the next thing, almost automatically. I woke up to that and thought “Why am I doing it?” I did an interview for the drama department [of a university], and I enjoyed the practical day enormously, and didn’t enjoy the interview very much at all. I felt even then that one’s instincts were going to be quashed, or kind of channeled into certain directions. I suddenly got a very strong feeling that it wasn’t quite the place for me. I was asked what my decision would be if I got a place at both the university and the drama school. Apparently I had declared my intention of applying to the Old Vic. I was so pissed off after the interview, that I said “I’d go to drama school.” And that’s what I did. I’ve always taken it as a compliment that the university didn’t offer me a place. An indication they thought I

1. Richardson is referring to the British system of discretionary grants. Students in every discipline—with the exception of dance and drama—automatically receive a grant to attend universities and professional institutes. The local town council decides on grants given to those interested in studying drama and dance; thus the grants are given at the council’s “discretion.” It is a fairly universal opinion in the U.K. that the town councils are completely unqualified to determine who should receive such grants. Richardson realized that she was unlikely to receive a grant from her local council, and thus moved to Bristol, where as a resident, the local council (in a town with its own famous drama school) would be much more likely to recognize talent, and award her a grant for drama school.

would get in at the Vic school.

CZ: Was Bristol Old Vic the only drama school that you applied to?

MR: No, no. LAMDA [London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts] and Central [School of Speech and Drama]. Central couldn't even offer an audition, because they were the only subsidized school at that point,² and they were just swamped with applications. LAMDA, I got in, but couldn't get a grant. They said "Don't worry too much about that," but by that time Bristol had said "Come back in a year's time," which I thought meant that they thought I needed another year in the world and I think they were probably right, so that's what I did. During that time I worked with Nat Brenner on an outside course about comedy and farce. He said "What are you going to do with yourself?" and I said "Well, I'm going to come to your school, if you'll have me." And he said "Yeah. You can come. You'll still do the auditions, though." It was great.³

CZ: What it was like to be at The Old Vic?

MR: I remember being excited to go in every day, and learn something. That's the best of being student really, without the idea of having to do exams, and tie yourself in knots about that. There's speech training, there's movement training... At that time they didn't have facilities for film and television really, they just had a radio room. I remember us being in a radio competition. In that sense it seemed quite antiquated. It has a tradition for being quite a workmanlike school, a classical school. You work from the Greeks, and on history plays, and upwards. We didn't do really any modern stuff; anything like that was extracurricular, and of course that's what you wanted to do, because it was like a breath of fresh air. Quite a number of plays were done: I remember we did *Three Women* about Sylvia Plath, some Albee was done, things like that. You have the energy to do that outside of the hours. I enjoyed the speech training although, perversely, I remember that I became so conscious of how to produce a sound that I actually lost my voice for a time. It was very strange, and made me think that actually what I wanted to do was do it by myself—you know, bedroom ranting, as I call it—and I had no business being [at drama school]. To be a performer, you have to be out there. It was a very strange experience.

CZ: What other sorts of classes did you have?

MR: Movement was great, because I'd never really done anything like that very much. This sort of yoga-based stuff, stamina stuff, mad Greek dancing, in the heat of the mid-day sun. It's very good for coordination and form. I remember also doing Laban-based movement... Also putting routines together, in case you're ever called to be in a musical, how you put something across, even if you're not a naturally wonderful dancer. They're concentrating much more now on that; there are so many musicals around at the moment.

CZ: What did they teach you about characterization at Bristol Old Vic?

MR: Well, they're very strong on imagination. And whatever your text is, it should offer you all the answers if you study it well enough. And it's not only what's in the lines, but what's between the lines. If there's a silence, why is there a

silence? What might be happening in that silence, what might you be thinking in that silence. But it's not until you leave drama school and start applying things that you really find out what you've learnt. There were many times where you didn't see how you were going to apply what you were being taught. There were some rather good disciplines, like we would spend ten minutes doing an arm gesture, while saying one speech. It's very good if you're extremely young and you're full of energy and you're liable to fling your arms and let things go, or snatch at sentences, which is something I still do. In texts you have to follow the line through. And it's very good for concentration and focus, calming you down and making you think and listen. Particularly if you're at the age most people are when they go to drama school; eighteen, nineteen. You're in such a hurry to get things across, to get things done, so I think that was very useful.

CZ: Did you ever harbor any ideas, when you were at drama school, of being a star?

MR: No. I don't know what I thought. I found something I could do, that was all. I was just sort of following something through. There are times when you really feel lost. You're in a sort of cocoon, because you're there.

CZ: When you were a kid, and you were going to the cinema, was there ever anybody that you wanted to emulate?

MR: All the guys. The guys had the best parts. Those were the ones, really. I liked Westerns a lot—John Wayne westerns, I'd go and watch those all the time, and be able to practically recite the whole movie. I had tremendous recall, for things like that, or anything that was on the television that I really liked, I could recall a lot of it.

CZ: Would you watch things over and over again?

MR: We didn't have tapes then, it wasn't like that. But, yeah I'd go and see movies several times. Whatever your obsession is at the time, whatever excites the imagination. It was a combination of Westerns, and I remember seeing the film *Cromwell* at the time. At that time I was a member of the Sealed Knot, which is the Cavaliers and Roundheads Association. I was thirteen, fourteen or something, and not acting but that's quite similar, it's enactment. I was extremely into T.E. Lawrence—I don't mean Peter O'Toole, yes, I saw the film and I loved the film—at the same time I was reading all about the desert, and his time in the desert, and the kind of a guy he was....

CZ: So, you were a romantic.

MR: Broadly speaking, I would say, yes.

CZ: My big hero when I was around that age was Isadora Duncan.

MR: Great! What a wonderful role model.

CZ: I think it's a little morbid, too.

MR: That's okay, because that's what's going on as well at that time, isn't it... [in sepulchral tones] death, mortality. The women sort of came later; I wasn't too enamored of many actresses, I can't remember many at that time. Well, I remember Irene Worth very strongly, because I went to see her in *King Lear*, which she's so wonderful in. It was a mixed bag of people, really.

CZ: Was it your idea to go into film?



Louis Malle's
Damage (1992)

MR: I think I'm quite lucky to have a nice guy for an agent who I'm still with, in England. Actually what happened was that I was doing a play *Insignificance*, back in Bristol, having a great time, and somebody who wasn't the director [of *Dance With A Stranger*] came to see that production, and they'd been looking for somebody. I had no idea about film. When you're doing theater, you don't really think about film, and when you're doing film you don't really think about theater, or I don't. They saw me and thought that I might be worth seeing in an audition situation, a reading situation. They'd been looking for quite some time. They didn't know what they wanted; whether they wanted somebody who was already somewhat known, which means that people might have preconceived ideas about them, or to go with somebody who nobody had seen before, I don't know how many people they saw. My agent said to me afterwards—he was rather confused—because when he set me up for it, he thought that my situation was somewhat similar, not that I was a hostess in a drinking club, but that I had somehow reinvented myself, lost my accent, to do this job [in *Insignificance*]. I found it completely fascinating that he would think that; we hadn't known each other very long. But that wasn't my story. However... it did work out eventually. Not on the first reading. I remember spectacularly meeting Mike [Newell] on the way out; I was just furious. I'd travelled all the way down from Lancaster

Rep, and I just thought "Some people just think the whole world stops for them."

CZ: Did you read with the other actors?

MR: No. But I knew Rupert Everett was going to do the part. I didn't know at that point that Ian Holm was going to be in it. When I heard that Ian Holm was going to be in it, when I got the part I thought to myself "Oh god, I've got to take this seriously now."

CZ: Did you ever see the film with Diana Dors based on the Ruth Ellis story? [*Yield to the Night*, a.k.a. *Blonde Sinner* 1956]

MR: Eventually I did, a long time afterwards. I liked it, she's good.

2. Central is one of a handful of British drama schools that has opted to become part of the British University system. The positive consequences of this decision are that all the students who are accepted to Central are automatically subsidized, the negative consequences are that the students must now take many courses that they consider irrelevant to their education as actors.

3. A note of explanation concerning auditions for drama schools in Britain, and particularly at The Bristol Old Vic is in order. The Old Vic has over 12,000 applicant each year. They audition each applicant over a series of weeks, and then narrow the competition down to approximately 300 students. These 300 are then broken into several groups, and asked to spend a long weekend at The Old Vic. The instructors then do a series of workshops with the students, determining their suitability for the particular program offered at their school, their level of concentration, discipline, maturity, etc. They also try to determine if the students they choose will work well together as a group.



Willem Dafoe and Miranda Richardson in
Brian Gilbert's *Tom and Viv* (1994).

CZ: How did you feel when you got this part?

MR: I didn't know what I was in for, and they said "Well, you're going to get very, very tired, go away for a week." They sent me away for a week supposedly to just prepare for [the fatigue]. And they were right. It was nine weeks of on every day. Originally, it was seven weeks, and then we got more money. I had no resources, really. I didn't feel protected, but I wasn't expecting to be protected. In retrospect, I felt very well looked-after cinematically. I thought they did a brilliant job. But I was thrown in the deep end with a million props, and the continuity lady saying "I'm going to bug you. You did this on this, and this on this [take]; if you could do that again that would be wonderful." Because I was concentrating so much about that, I didn't have time to worry about other things, or the big pressures; I just did it.

CZ: You mean things like hitting your marks...

MR: It comes to you. And you also have to practice that. If I haven't done filming for a while, somebody will tell me something and I'll think I've heard it and completely ignore it. Then if it's really a problem you can work something else out. If it's really difficult for you to bear down by that time emotionally, or whatever, then something can be worked out. But because it was every day for nine weeks, you get into it quite fast.

CZ: How did you feel about the character? A lot of the women actors that I speak to say that they have to fall in love with their characters, no matter how despicable they might be.

MR: I think you have to find some enjoyment there, yes. I don't think you have to love them, I think you have to understand them. I felt sorry for her. And I also thought she was funny, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes intentionally. It's very hard to say....

CZ: Did you work with a dialogue coach?

MR: No, I didn't actually. I heard one little bit of tape, it was the only bit of tape; they're very drunk. She, talking to Desmond [Ian Holm's character]. She's very hyper, you know, she's very highly strung. That's where that came from really... And the pretention, somebody who's trying to make herself other than she is. And the time it's set in. I thought the film captured the time very well.

CZ: How much did you know about the real person?

MR: Not much. There's only a couple of books. There's one very salubrious book which I read, and I read one which concentrated more on the events leading up to the trial. I looked at pictures of her, how she comes across in photographs. That's very helpful when you're doing something very physical.

CZ: You didn't feel this need to create a backstory for her; what happened in her childhood that got her to this point?

MR: Well, I think that goes somewhere here (points to head). The script was good; it's implicit in the script, though I did read stuff beforehand so I could have an awareness of where she came from, what she was escaping from. You can't play all that all the time. I remember talking to someone who worked at the Royal Shakespeare Company with one partic-

ular director, and the director was finding it hard to articulate what he meant, and eventually somebody said "You mean you want us to invest that line with the sixteenth century?" And he said "Yes!" And you can't do that.

CZ: You mean because it's not an actable thing?

MR: No! You can do as much research as you like into the manners of the time; you can try and disclaim all knowledge of the twentieth century, but these are also real people that you're playing, so you can't do that ridiculous direction.

CZ: In terms of Ruth's character, how did you find the actable emotions for her? I would think it would be hard to find what Stanislavski called a "through-line" for her character, since she's masochistic one moment and sadistic the next.

MR: Is she?

CZ: I think she is extremely sadistic to the Ian Holm character, and will take any form of abuse from Rupert Everett's character.

MR: I would have to say it's the day-to-day processes: who you're playing with, and what they offer you at the time in that situation. I think with film you just come in with a sort of a broad landscape in your mind, and a familiarity with the words, rather than knowing them so well that you can't discard [something] or find them for yourself while filming. But I don't know if I knew that at the time, I mean it's kind of instinctive, really. We talked and read through scenes for about ten days beforehand, but that's only to make everybody feel at ease, really. You don't end up probably playing what you did in rehearsal, and of course your playing arena is completely different. Once you get on set, the confines of the set, and what's around you, paints the picture as much as anything else.

CZ: Is it unusual for you to be given a ten-day period for rehearsal?

MR: Yeah. Certainly in the British film industry, yeah. You get a few days. It depends on the nature of the piece. If it's improvisational, you probably just do it straight off. Mike talked about the fifties a bit: after the war period, what people wanted, what they were looking for. He said everybody wanted a party, which I found a very useful note, and so she is providing a party atmosphere a lot of the time for a lot of people. She was a very small fish, really, but the big fish in that very tiny pond. Ian's so great, he was very supportive, and there was no sort of ego-trip going on there, for his character.

CZ: Was this one of Rupert Everett's first films?

MR: I think it must have been. He'd done *Another Country*, by then, which, in British film terms, was meteoric, really. This virtuoso performance from the stage, which they then transferred to film.

CZ: I find it surprising that they didn't make a plea of *non compas mento* for Ruth Ellis, because of the drugs and alcohol; she's obviously in a dissociative state when she does the shooting. Did people generally support her hanging?

MR: She's made an example of.

CZ: Because she was a scummy person who deserved to die?

MR: Yeah. I don't know if it was even that clear. It was horrific, just horrific. She didn't make any attempt to save her-

self, either; she said "No, I intended to kill him." So it sounds like premeditated murder. I think she was very self-dramatizing, and this was the most famous she was going to get, actually. Like the guy who killed John Lennon, except that this was a smaller British personality. She bleached her hair specially, so she would look nice in court, so they wouldn't think she was a fleabag. She made no attempt to come in looking ghastly and sorry for herself and out of it, if she had then there might have been mitigating circumstances. "Crimes of passion" didn't apply in England, just on the continent. We're not supposed to have those here.

CZ: How did you feel about watching yourself?

MR: It was awkward, but I almost didn't recognize myself. I'd just remember seeing a rough cut; I was terrified, because I knew so little about filming, and the soundtrack was not ready, and the levels hadn't been balanced, and I was horrified. I saw this scene where there was this enormous sound of a Hoover going on in the club, and I thought "They can't be going to leave it like that." That's how naive I was; I just thought this was awful; how can they tell anything? I saw the finished thing, and it was very different. Just this funny little person, really. I thought "How can she have caused such a scandal?" Not really recognizing oneself on screen.

CZ: Do you ever use rushes as a tool?

MR: I should. The only time I've sat through a lot of rushes was *Kansas City*. It was really like a party. Jenny [Jennifer] Jason-Leigh is very practical about that kind of thing. No matter how tired she is, she goes to rushes. She says "Come, come here, you must come here! You missed a great scene yesterday..." She shamed me into going, and when I went, I had a good time, but I was in very capable hands in that movie, so there wasn't too much reason to feel worried about going. Stupidly, of course, when you feel in less capable hands, those are the times when you should probably go to rushes more, and say "God, I really hated that, I'd like an opportunity to do that again, if it's at all possible," or "What are you going to do with this?" or "Are you going to use that shot because that other shot seems much better to me." Then, there are people who never go to watch their movies.

CZ: Do you generally feel well taken care of? Did you ever have battle of personalities with someone over your treatment on the set, where you felt like you needed more time, or more takes, or more discussion, and you weren't given the opportunity?

MR: There have been a couple... sometimes in Britain—well, almost always in Britain—there isn't enough money and enough time, so they get people who can do the work. There is something to be said for not doing too many takes; I don't necessarily think that take fifty-four is going to be better than take one. It might be slightly different, but just to keep on slogging is not necessarily the best way of achieving a performance. Once you have the pressure of knowing that you have to move on, and you have two takes, that is also very difficult to deal with. If you're not happy with it, you either get so you don't care, you go "Oh, fuck it," which is dangerous, or you just get angry. So, yes, there have been times when I've thought "Oh, okay, I've got to save myself, because I'm the

one who's up there in the end." It's very aggravating and frustrating.

CZ: The first film that you were in was a really big international success, and it played all the big festivals. How did that feel?

MR: It wasn't well-publicized, though. I was out of touch with it really, because I wasn't very well after it; I'd just got completely run down. I think everybody was sort of learning at the time. I was in a daze, really, that's the best way to describe it—not a glorious daze; I mean it was a lot of hot air, a lot of interviewers asking the same things again and again, photo shoots, not feeling up to it, and not knowing what would come next, and not really ready for it either. And there was a big thing about the resurgent new British film industry. I think it was a very good film, but there wasn't a very obvious follow-up to that in the British film industry.

CZ: Well, it goes in fits and starts, it seems to be re-emerging, and then goes through a period of crisis again. What did you do after this great success?

MR: Actually quite soon after that, I went back to the theater, because I need that variety anyway. There is an unreality about the film world. With theater you can feel the process much more clearly. If you're going from point A to point B, you know how you got there, and there's a lot more dialogue, more interaction, really.

CZ: What sort of theater were you doing at the time?

MR: I did Mamet plays at the Royal Court, I did a film and some television, things like that.

CZ: Do you see a pattern in the parts that you're drawn to?

MR: No. Other people do, I know. But I don't, and I also feel a lot luckier than people who have to work in America, because absolutely they are made to play the same thing again and again, you know, "You did that well, here's another one, do this, and then you can move on to something else," but you end up playing four or five parts which seem to me very, very similar before you can break out of that at all. Then it seems like a huge major move, and "Gosh, we never dreamt that this person could do this! Wow! Because we're used to seeing them doing...." It's very strange, and very frustrating, I would think.

CZ: Getting back to the original question: I see you really exploring your dark side a lot in your roles.

MR: Yeah.

CZ: The only parts I've seen that you've played that are more light-hearted are in *Enchanted April* and *Black Adder*.

MR: Well, all right. But you haven't seen *Kansas City*, you haven't seen *Evening Star*. I don't know, what other movies have I done?

CZ: *Damage*, *Crying Game*, *Redemption* [a depressing BBC drama]....

MR: Oh, *Crying Game*. Now, you see, I don't take those roles for the reasons you might suppose. I wanted to work with Neil [Jordan], I thought it was a great script—it was like being in a circus troupe—and there was a sort of a lack of responsibility about it as well.

CZ: Why was that?

MR: I don't know, it had something to do with the way he

films, or something. I didn't think "Oh here's another dark person...."

CZ: I don't mean you go looking for these sorts of dark parts on a conscious level. Sometimes actors have told me that their lives dovetail with the parts that they choose, and that they learn things about themselves. Again, it's especially true of the women actors I've talked to.

MR: Another reason for doing *The Crying Game* was because there was a chance to do some more action in it, be quite physical onscreen, which is a relief. A bit of gun-toting, and running, and sort of roughness. I really relished the opportunity to do that in that particular instance. *Enchanted April*, I sort of had to be persuaded to do, but actually it was rather nice. I liked the idea of the geographical thing, you know, of the English personality being transported somewhere else and something else happening to—broadly speaking—the English psyche. I thought "Oh, well let's try this, let's see if it happens," and of course what happened was that it rained in Italy all the time. We left brilliant sunshine in England and it was perverse, that we were acting under this very cloudy sky for the first two weeks, anyway.

CZ: Do you ever feel that roles affect you psychologically or emotionally, or is it mostly just a job?

MR: The story affects you while you're doing it, and you're concentrating on it, and focusing on how does this character react in this situation, so there is some kind of channel for that. But I don't have a problem leaving things behind at the end of the day. That doesn't mean that I'm not thinking about the next day, it means that I don't have to be in character when I'm off-screen. I don't have a problem with that, I don't have to wear the same things the person wears. That's one way of doing it, and I don't know whether it's a superstition with certain people, you know, they feel that the process is so nebulous anyway, that they have to hang on to that or nothing's going to happen... I don't really know, but I don't do that.

CZ: That relates to one of the things I'm trying to deal with in these interviews—how British actors feel they're different from American actors, because usually it's the Americans you hear about who can't leave their characters behind at the end of the day. There is something about British actors, even though they've been knighted, that makes them want to be treated like ordinary blokes. As [Dame] Judi Dench put it, "I think of myself as a jobbing actor." What do you think it is about the British character that makes people feel that way, because I don't think that Americans feel like that? Americans seem to want their actors to be heroes to a much greater extent.

MR: Americans have more of a tradition of film anyway, and as I said there's a level of unreality about film, and there's so much more riding on it. It's a complete world for that amount of time that you're working on it. It's like a big family; everybody's focused on that one thing. In theater much more, people have their lives, they go back to their house during the day; you do the thing and you go home. There are other things happening. On location, when you're removed from most of the things that are normally surrounding you, then

different things come into play, I suppose. Myths are built up around actors, which I think are actually very damaging, because people can start to believe what's said about them, or think they're gods, or do anything they like. Everybody needs to be given confidence, to be able to work, but I think the hype actually works against people; I think they get less secure, because in the end, people are frightened to direct them, they're frightened to make any demands on them at all. In the end you get more left alone, and it would be terrifying if somebody felt that they were so in awe of you that they didn't direct you. I couldn't handle it.

CZ: In going to all of these drama schools—RADA, and East 15, and all the major places around London and outside of London, there still seems to be this whole debate that's raging about “the Method,” among the acting teachers and the students.

MR: I think whatever works for you, you can use bits of anything. I think the only book I actually enjoyed reading was Uta Hagen's book *Respect for Acting*. I thought there was a lot of sense in that. One of the most important things is just to try and keep open, and observe. Hopefully you have to be curious, otherwise you just end up playing an aspect yourself all the time. Some people do very very well with that; it's limited, but comfortable for the public, obviously, because they know what they're going to get.

CZ: You just finished doing a film with someone who would be regarded as sort of a quintessential “Method” actor—Jennifer Jason Leigh. [*Kansas City*]

MR: Jenny I feel works in a pretty similar way to me, except that she's much more researched. She's extremely practical, and she would get as much information as possible, about anything pertaining to the part beforehand. I feel like I rely on the script a lot more; what's actually there on the page. I might subsequently find that what I'm actually supposed to say doesn't completely do it for me. But I think it's the continual discoveries that go along on a film, you know. When you're there, you flesh it out more, even if you're not working in chronological order, which is what usually happens. Jenny doesn't have any problems shedding the character at the end of the day. She's tired—we're all tired—but we go out and play. It's good to spend time with somebody that you have a lot of screen time with, just so you can trust each other. You feel like “Oh, whatever I'm going to be thrown, or throw at this person, they'll be fine, there's no ego basis for it.” It's character based, or your instinct says to do this. If you stop and say “Actually, that was crap,” or “I don't think that was really very truthful,” you could do that. You're not going to spoil the mystery by doing that. It's partly a practical. It's not that I'm completely trying to demystify the process, and I'm not, because I don't think you can. No matter how much you try and analyze it, it is a mysterious process; it's actually difficult to talk about, because when you get up there something might just come in from left field, and you don't know where it comes from, but it feels right, or it's interesting, or something.

CZ: Can you think of an example of where you instinctually did something that turned out to be a happy accident, on

the spot?

MR: I don't know, really; I think the scene in *Damage* was good. We did it in one take, really, and I thought it was a very well-written scene, that kitchen scene. It didn't really need to be directed, we knew what the physical confines of it were; it had a natural arc to make, and we knew it was a very emotional high point in the film. I didn't analyze how I was going to do it, so I just sort of did it, and there's a bit of you watching what's going on at the same time at it is happening, and you feel that something is right. That's the only way I can describe it. The only other way I've described acting on film, or what it feels like, is it feels like a sort of moment-to-moment combustion, like an engine firing. It's partly to do with preparation, partly to do with the atmosphere in the room, and giving more or less energy, depending on whether you're performing in a close-up or in a really wide shot.

CZ: Do you pay very close attention to those technical things?

MR: I'm aware of the camera, but I'm not always as aware as I should be of exactly where it is. Unless you're in a big close-up, and then you can't help it. I always feel like I'm being pulled into the camera when it's near, like ectoplasm or something. Even when I'm playing a scene where the other actor might be right there, it's really strange. The same is, I suppose, true in a way, on stage; it doesn't mean you're not focusing on the person you're playing with, but the audience is out there, and you're aware of that.

CZ: Are you aware of giving the editor cutting points, or anything like that?

MR: Occasionally I am, and I think that's something that can be an instinct but it can also be learned, and hopefully one learns more the more you do it. I'm sure Jack Nicholson is past master at that. But I also don't want to be so caught up in technique that I can't just play, so I haven't made it my business to learn all about that. I want to be free of that, really, I want to be able to trust that those people know what they're doing.

CZ: Was there ever a part that you felt you really had a hard time understanding? Would you ask for help in that situation? Do you generally find directors are helpful in that sense?

MR: I know I'm often amazed; I feel I got away with something. I've done a take and I think, “That can't be all there is to it. I must have missed something.” I mean, I remember feeling like that a lot on *Tom and Viv*; I don't know how often I articulated it. I thought, “But I just sort of did that.” Sometimes the equation is, if there is no apparent effort, then it can't be registering, which is ridiculous, because if you *see* effort, you know something isn't right. It's excruciating to watch. But sometimes, it's like “Why was that so easy?” I don't trust myself then, I feel I shouldn't be doing the job because it's that easy. But of course, the goal is ease, apparent ease; that's why a lot of fabulous actors don't really get as much attention as they deserve because it's so effortless, what they do, it's so right, it's so zen! If I don't trust something then I will say, and Brian [Gilbert, dir. *Tom and Viv*] was very supportive and actually very confident in what he saw and what he wanted. Oftentimes, he would just say “I'm very

happy. Do you want to do another one? Well, if you're happy, okay, fine!" You have to trust that, you can't go on forever, wanking. Maybe the reason that felt easy was because here's somebody who was actually expressing herself [Viv], everybody else was much more cramped and stolid around her, and not saying what they really thought, and she was actually refreshingly honest, and it was a relief, so I felt fine, full of energy and didn't have a problem and wasn't emotionally brought down, but I occasionally distrusted that.

CZ: Are there times when you really feel that your creative juices aren't flowing? What do you do in a case like that? Do you ever use improvisation to get at the heart of a text?

MR: I suppose I do, but just for myself. Jenny and I would do it to free up some energy sometimes. The before and after of a take, in the car, and then we'd drop it, we'd just sort of rush around vaguely in character, and then be in the scene and then come out of it. Bob [Altman] often encourages that anyway, and when he actually wanted specifically some more text—there's a scene in *Union Station* where he wanted us to improvise some stuff before we ever shot it. The night before, we sat in his caravan and drew out some stuff about the Lindbergh baby. I was very grateful to Jenny in that instance, because she came in with that already researched. She had got stuff all about what was going on at the time, and that was extremely useful, because we could have these great conversations: two women talking on equal terms about their views on something sensational that was happening in the papers on a daily basis. That was great fun. I won't stop a set to do that, or anything like that. I saw Holly Hunter giving a kind of a master class, a Q and A, and saying that she wanted to feel in a certain way before a scene, and she actually got the extras to push her around, she said "I'm asking you do this." She wanted to be really angry, and she said anger was something she had trouble getting in touch with, and she wanted to feel really really pissed off, and so she got them to do that for her. I've never asked that; I think I'm too self-sufficient, I always feel that I should be able to generate it for myself. It doesn't always work if you can't generate the sad feeling about this, to think of some other situation [in which something similar happened to you]. In Uta Hagen's book she will ask you to do that kind of thing, and while I see it makes perfect sense, I don't feel I truly can do that; I can't necessarily replace one situation with another, and make it work for that moment. It's more likely to happen off screen, when I'm just thinking around things. But I think what you do is you remember that emotion, sort of a sense memory, it's part mimicry, part instinct, and part relaxation.

CZ: It's a curious thing, how different actors learn a script. Do you do it by emotional association?

MR: On a film script, particularly, you can't work in a vacuum, you have to work in tandem with the people you will be working with. You can see what the text says, but until you get there and find out what the situation is, and whether indeed you are going to say those things, or whether it's going to be changed, which quite often happens... it's more a question of thinking around it, saying "What is truthful to my character?" and then you get there and play it out. It's like

boxers in a ring, because you come in from each side and you play it out—not necessarily so that one wins and one loses, but what kind of action you take and when. What was the original question?

CZ: I was asking about how you learn a script.

MR: I familiarize myself with the script, rather than learning it.

CZ: Are you saying that you're drawing the basic emotional parameters for the character without filling in the details? I think it would be better if we talk about it specifically, because I want to talk about *Tom and Viv*, because I think that it's one of the most complex women's roles that I've seen in a recent film. Did you read any accounts of the relationship between T. S. Eliot and Vivien [Haigh-Wood]?

MR: Yeah, but they're all biased, that's the trouble. I'm not saying that just to defend her, but it's everybody bolstering Tom, and saying she's dragging him down. I've just been reading a lot of Woolf, for *Orlando*, and being swept away by it. There are mentions of Viv in Woolf's writing, and actually very kind mentions. It's not at all one-sided. You can see that here's somebody who's actually being encouraged to write, and who apparently thought very highly of Virginia, and Virginia had obviously given her enough encouragement to continue her writing. She was using it almost medicinally; she was writing just to express. I didn't feel I had to read all of Eliot's stuff to understand. I read quite a lot of his stuff, and listened to his tapes as well. I found him quite mad, really. I mean he's the one who's nuts; he's stuck, that's what we try to show in the film.

CZ: At the end there's the image of both of them imprisoned; Viv in the institution, Tom is last seen behind the bars of an elevator. What did you understand her medical condition to be?

MR: A hormonal imbalance. They talk vaguely about the endocrine system. It's something which is actually quite easy to rectify once it's diagnosed. It's appalling P.M.S. Her periods were very erratic—she would have a period for three days, and then a gap of a week, and then it would come on again, so she was all over the place emotionally. She was diagnosed as being morally insane, which really means bad behavior.

CZ: Vivien's life was tragic; I don't think there's any doubt of that. What do you think her motivations were, or what you think was the essence of her character? What was it that made her a tragic figure? What were the different forces that you saw ruling her life?

MR: Well, the time she was in, the lack of understanding about this specifically women's problem, the concerns of the family for respectability, and the right form of behavior for the class they were in. She's not pukkah, they're upper middle class, not top-drawer. They're merchant class, but the concerns are much stronger. I think had she been upper-class, and with a great deal of money she could have done what the fuck she liked. She wouldn't have been locked in a tower in the east wing or anything, she'd have just been allowed to roam the property and be eccentric, because she had the money and the position to be. The requirements of that class and that family at that time were other. And the fact was that

she then met Tom, who was incapable of rising to the occasion in any manner. She became his cross that he had to bear, which became part of what informed his work, instead of it being a marriage. The intellectual spark was there, but then he was so lionized and applauded and actually needed and wanted that, that I think she felt shut out. The way I've described it, actually diminishes her. Her writing, when you read it, is extremely personal. The characters that she does manage to get down, there's always a central woman, you can feel it very strongly, it's her, an aspect of her... she wasn't supported.

CZ: She was treated as an "ill" person, all the time, by her family.

MR: Treading very carefully around her, and nobody saying what they really thought or really felt.

CZ: The mother says, "Vivien will be taken care of as she always has been." It's not unlike other families in which someone is labeled a "problem," and they have great difficulty escaping that role. I'm surprised to learn that she wrote anything, because in the film it seemed that she had no outlet for her creativity, except for shopping; it seems whenever she's going through one of these manic episodes, she comes back with a lot of shopping bags.

MR: Yeah, low self-esteem. It's like any of us who are impulse buyers, or hormonal buyers, trying to make herself better, by doing it externally, you know. She's looking more and more wretched and ragged and worn, and she looks sort of ravaged, really, at the end of her life, in photographs. She also looks like a totally different person from photograph to photograph. It's quite uncanny. You can see her; there are an awful lot [of photographs] in which she's blurred, because she's moving. There's an energy, she's on all the time, and the camera's caught this sort of languid group of people, and Viv's always in motion, looking at something else. So the photographs, again, were extremely useful.

CZ: There seemed to be a dichotomy that's presented in the film between the view of her as a free spirit and on the other hand, being unstable. It's almost as if, had she been an artist, her behavior would have been quite acceptable.

MR: Not in the Bloomsbury group, I don't think. It's much too blasé and quite snobby. Tom was the star; nobody wanted outpourings, they wanted carefully considered, reworked expression.

CZ: When she says in the film "They all admired Tom's mind, but I am his mind," do you feel that she was deluded about her influence on his writing? He says to her at one point "I can't write without you," and she says "I know." It seems like she never formed her own life or her own relationships, or felt that she was worth anything.

MR: That's it, really, an appalling lack of self-esteem, because she's let the side down from the moment she reached puberty. You know, it's a shameful thing, and I think there are times when she reacts with rage against that, and times when she just feels guilty and extremely depressed, and is at the mercy of her body, and can't see anything clearly.

CZ: Do you think that she was deluded about her influence on T.S. Eliot?

MR: No. He wouldn't have written the books he wrote if he

hadn't met Viv. She's threaded through his work. She's also tremendously supportive to him, and expected and wanted him to be championed, but not to the exclusion of her personality.

CZ: Why do you think that she decided to do nothing about her incarceration once she had calmed down, and was apparently well?

MR: Because I think by that time it was a sort of sanctuary, and I think she would have been more lonely out on her own. Her mother died when she was in there... She didn't have the resources anymore to start again, and say, "Right then, let's discover the world now." And she wouldn't have had the money; she's not landed gentry.

CZ: Why do you think that Tom never visited her?

MR: He couldn't cope, emotionally, at all, with the guilt.... He was free, in one sense, to get on with his work, but bearing that enormously important burden out of which came his work. There wouldn't have been any conversation between them; can you imagine? It would have been excruciating.

CZ: Do you have a sense of an arc in your career? Do you see or feel a difference in your acting from when you were in your twenties until now?

MR: I think that's where technique comes in; it's much stronger. When you're nineteen, you feel like I can do anything, and you do, it's just that you do it instinctually. Later on there's a sort of fusion of the instinct and the technique. The more you think you know, the less you know. Perhaps it's more to do with a sort of compulsion. I often think I'm not always going to do it; I don't know quite what else I would do. I think you get more fearful, but then it's something that you have to work through. At times when I say to myself: "You're mad, you're mad. What made you think you could do this?" Partly an act of will, trying to move on in some way, to different challenges. The physicality of it is very important to me, because this is your instrument, and a lot of the time, it's concentrated up here [points from neck up]. And it's a relief to feel everything working at once.

CZ: Who do you think has influenced you the most, as a grown woman? An actor, a director, some other person?

MR: Lots of people. I think one takes from a myriad of different things, not just specific parts, but that makes you feel wonderful about the creative process, about art, the visual arts, and music. There are a number of people I admire greatly, and it's something to do with an honesty about what they do. I think Francis Bacon's stuff is wonderful, because I find it very honest, not because I'm morbid or like to see something flayed. I find it very honest. There are writers who I love to read because I feel the honesty in their writing, and it's something to do with "Yes, that's how I would want to say it if I had chosen that form." There are actors who are wonderful in specific things; some people who you like to watch all the time. I mean, I love Paul Scofield, Oh god.... Too much, too many. Sometimes people affect you at a particular time in your life; I'm sure that's true. Maybe you can't listen to Mozart before you're thirty, or something; I don't know if that's true, but maybe Oasis means more to you at a certain age than Haydn. Just sort of take from everything, I guess.

by Diane Sippl

If the Heart Had Eyes Tears, Silence, and Snow in Seeking the Maternal Performance



I could feel at the time
There was no way of knowin'
Fallen leaves in the night
Who can say where they're blowin'
As free as the wind
Hopefully learnin'
Why the sea on the tide
Has no way of turnin'

More than this, you know there's nothing
More than this, tell me one thing
More than this, you know there's nothing

It was fun for awhile
There was no way of knowin'
Like a dream in the night
Who can say where we're goin'
No care in the world
Maybe I'm learnin'
Why the sea on the tide
Has no way of turnin'

More than this, you know there's nothing
More than this, tell me one thing
More than this, there's nothing

Bryan Ferry, from *Love Among the Ruins*
by 10,000 Maniacs



Ponette

Dad asks me what I think of death when I still used to talk. "Nothing," I said. "I think nothing of death." He's always asking me questions I don't have words for. Sad? Sad because I can't say why sad.

The Girl, in *The Quiet Room* by Rolf de Heer

... The plot? The action? I haven't any, everything seems dust and ashes to me compared to these three or four months in my town surrounded by about fifty children to whom I could say in dialect: "ver la boca da peu (open your mouth wider)." ...The wonder must be in us, expressing itself without wonder: the best dreams are those outside the mist, which can be seen like the veins of leaves.

Cesare Zavattini, in *Zavattini: Sequences from a Cinematic Life*

WHAT TRIGGERS MY WRITING HERE IS TEARS.

Each time I see *Ponette* I cry, and always at the same moments, it seems—those when *she* cries. Am I feeling for her, or for myself? Does it matter that she is a girl, and has lost her mother? Why do I feel fulfilled by the experience of her loss?¹

Regarding his mother's death and how he mourned her, Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* recalls his desire to sustain the strength of his grief, finding himself more alive with his pain than without it.² I retain a vivid image of him looking at her photo and explaining, "Affect was what I didn't want to reduce; being irreducible, it was therefore what I wanted, what I ought to reduce the Photograph to."³ While I have always been interested in how the cinema becomes a catalyst for feeling, the fact that the photo Barthes chose to discuss was of his mother before the age of five must have occurred to me as I first watched four-year-old Ponette pursue a reunion with her deceased mother in Jacques Doillon's film.⁴ Barthes had never seen or known his mother that way, much as I had never met Ponette. I have since wondered what feelings can be articulated by a four-year-old, or, put another way, what emotions *we* invest in *her*—invest in the sense that, as Emily Dickinson observed, "a charm invests a face/ Imperfectly beheld."

On this thought Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe captivates me with his claim that the "primitive" in a text is its communication of inexplicable clarity beyond what it can articulate.⁵ Every bit as much as Barthes' analysis of his photograph and his way of looking at it, Gilbert-Rolfe's theories of painting have led me to question the nature of cinema, particularly various codes of realism—neorealism, poetic realism, magical realism. What is it that brings me to experience the emotion of grief as both directly familiar and strangely enigmatic at once? Could performance be the key, and age a peculiar factor?⁶

Two films have helped me to approach these questions, along with *Ponette* itself, from a variety of angles. *The Quiet*

Room by Rolf De Heer also employs girl actresses—sisters, in fact, playing the same girl at ages seven and three—who mourn the loss of a mother not in her physical death, but as she was in the past.⁷ I use *The Quiet Room* for comparison here because of its slightly alternative film language although, like *Ponette*, it seeks to present the girl's point of view through realism. *Will There Be Snow for Christmas?* by Sandrine Veysset also uses girl performers, but in roles written and directed by a woman that stem from her own girlhood.⁸ Furthermore, the focus is on the mother, rather than the girls, who mourns what she is not able to give them in their life.

Each film indulges the female characters' desire to dwell in their emotions to the point of visual excess, which is expressed differently from film to film. These private "spaces," be they play, fantasies, dreams, memories, or visions, are performed in the film as "processes"—experiences both real and imaginary that are worthy of time. I would like to begin my probe with the visual, then conclude it by pondering time; I am curious how these two axes of cinema relate to performances of female mourning within codes of filmic realism.

The visual retains about itself an element of the unencoded even when it has become part of a code.... (This) has something to do with the visual's relationship with sight. That is to say, with the relationship between that which is made to be seen and seeing itself.... Language, as the code of codes, irreversibly erodes or obliterates the visual, precisely because of its dependence on visual imagery, which turns everything one sees into a metaphor, causing the thing to be lost in the concept it's made to represent.

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "Vision's Resistance to Language"
Beyond Piety: Critical Essays on the Visual Arts, 1986-1993

1. For an interesting empirical study of mass audience reports of the occasion for tears in the cinema, but one that begs further analysis and interpretation, see Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, "Moved to tears: weeping in the cinema in postwar Britain," *Screen* 37:2 (Summer 1996) 152-173.

2. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill, 1981) 75.

3. This topic has been put forth and re-visited brilliantly by Kathleen Woodward in "Freud and Barthes: Theorizing Mourning, Sustaining Grief," *Discourse* 13:1 (Fall-Winter 1990-91) 93-110 and "Grief-Work in Contemporary American Cultural Criticism," *Discourse* 15: 2 (Winter 1992-93) 94-112.

4. *Ponette*, written and directed by Jacques Doillon and distributed in the U.S. by Arrow Releasing, Inc. in New York City, brought a much debated Best Actress award to Victoire Thivisol at the 1996 Venice Film Festival; she was 3 years old when cast in the film.

5. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beyond Piety: Critical Essays on the Visual Arts, 1986-1993* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 11.

6. See Harper and Porter in *Screen* (above) and also Tom Ryall's Report: "Moving Performance Conference: 'The British Experience of Early Cinema,' University of Bristol, 6-8 January 1996" in *Screen* 37:3 (Autumn 1996) 303-305.

7. *The Quiet Room*, written and directed by Rolf de Heer, 1996, distributed in the U.S. by Fine Line Features in New York City and Los Angeles.

8. *Will There Be Snow for Christmas?* (*Y aura-t-il de la neige à Noël?*), written and directed by Sandrine Veysset, 1996, distributed in Canada by Mongrel Media in Toronto.

In discussing the visual in relation to performance, perhaps I should begin by pointing out that *Ponette* is not so much a suspenseful narrative of consequential events as a prolonged processing of emotion in response to an already past event that we never see. The screen time we spend with Ponette, sequential though hardly even episodic, is structured by the tension between her resistance to the idea that she will never see her mother again and her acknowledgement of her mother's death. Even within this quiet conflict the girl for the longest time appears to be making little "progress" toward its resolution.⁹ Yet the film indulges her. Given that Ponette motivates the camera in every frame of the film but for a few brief shots in a few short scenes, the power of the film hinges on the extent to which we are able to engage ourselves with her. Then the question arises as to how we do this and why. And the ways to consider these questions have to do not with development of the narrative but, I propose, with the visual and its excesses. Here I don't mean the hypervisual or digital simulation sequences of action films¹⁰ or the sexually charged spectacles that compel an erotic gaze, or even the emotive excesses of performance in what have been labeled "genres of excess"—melodrama, horror films, and pornography¹¹—but that which escapes filmic codes because, while it is inherent in the visual itself and present within cinematic realism, it can be served only in part by language.

Victoire Thivisol's role, from the casting, workshop, scripting, and shooting stages of production to the edited images we see on the screen, situates her as not only pre-literate but largely pre-socialized.¹² Since she is, at the age of four, already in school, and the suddenness of her mother's accidental death forces her to address fairly complex theological, philosophical and epistemological ideas, perhaps the better word is pre-cultured: she can only grope at concepts of death that are voiced by her family, peers, and superiors to address its mysteries and curb the pain it brings. As such Ponette embodies and enacts her emotional turmoil washed up against one rationale and then another as she drifts from person to person in her small world teeming with conflicting accounts of what to think and believe. Yet no one can tell her what to *feel*, or *how*.

As the scenario places us within her world, the camera tracking both the public routines and the private journeys of her miniature body, we enter her point of view—paradoxically formed less by her pre-cultured mind than her needy heart, with eyes aching to imagine. At the same time, her little girl's body, in her rudimentary comings and goings guided by a presumably primitive knowledge, would

seem to house a sensibility so undeveloped as to serve as a tabula rasa for projections on the part of any adult spectator.

Jeremy-Rolfe asserts that if "sight knows only surprise or recognition, language, obliged to turn things into ideas before it can see them at all, knows only recognition."¹³ Even if this recognition should come as a surprise, language knows it as a shock of "*re*-cognition" rather than as a cognitive shock. This explains the possibility of recognizing in the apparently unscribed Ponette images of ourselves, or of "*re*-cognizing" the concepts of our own social and cultural currencies, our own transpersonal exchanges, via her performance. But I think that in mourning her loss, the girl ultimately resists this access—Victoire Thivisol, in her performance vis-à-vis knowing adult spectators, as much as Ponette, in her actions amidst children and grown-ups alike who would fill her up with mystical beliefs, debunkings of religion, medicinal syrups, and "smarty" candies, all to encourage her to move on with her life.

Ponette swallows their knowledge like rain through a sieve, and the evidence is in her performance. For all of Thivisol's talented and painstaking effort in acting no less than five scenes that require her to work her whole body into

The Quiet Room





The Quiet Room

a fountain of tears before our eyes, there is an element of her performance that defies description yet captures perception—an aspect of the visual that can only be called “performance as presence.” Ironically, this presence evolves in Ponette’s persistence in seeking the unreachable, her own form of the sublime which, with her limited cultural acumen, she registers not in the intricate codes of religion but in the natural, familiar, inspiring presence of her mother, now deceased, but walking, breathing, and playing with Ponette. At a place and time in which Ponette finally achieves ample solitude, her mother embraces her with compliments, apologies and challenges. She recounts the process of dying and points out the gaps in communication she and Ponette experienced as she left life. She reassures her that their play and their love are “for real,” yet confronts Ponette with her knowledge of the fact that she’s dead.

Why are you alive? To want everything... Does life scare you? No, life's not too much for my girl... You can die, but die alive, full of life. Until then the world is yours. Try every single thing. Everything... Hey, Ponette, whenever you want, jump up and catch a memory of me.

From the girl’s point of view, the sublime is not only manifest in her mother, but visible in her—that element of the visual that exceeds visualization because it is not coded in language, not accounted for by any of the film’s other characters or their ideas; from our point of view, Ponette’s visit from her mother, in “flesh and blood” so she wouldn’t scare her, is not expressed in any extra-realistic way in the film’s formal codes though it is inexplicable within the film’s diegesis. Ponette simply departs, at the end of her mother’s visit at the hillside

cemetery, with a sweater she didn’t bring with her and a few less “smarty” candies.

I have been discussing Ponette’s point of view on her world, and her quest for the maternal performance. Now what I have to confront within this notion of “performance as presence” is that Ponette herself would most likely not engage me, in performing her supernatural self-indulgence with the visual, were it not for an excess in the girl as well that I know I perceive as beauty. And I am hard-pressed to say that this beauty emanates from such classically defined visual terms as symmetry, harmony, and proportion in the human form. Much as Ponette offers a newly intriguing look in as many frames as she appears, I have to conclude that her beauty resides in what she *does*, which in this film amounts to no more than the lengths to which she is willing to go to feel what she *feels*. We see it in the body language of her dogged persistence in, quite literally, following her heart. And in this sense it is not so much her little body trudging to and fro in her relentless pursuit of her mother that compels me as it is the emphatic release of her solitary tears even as she stands in the company of those closest to her. For while her point of view, most sublimely delivered by her visit with her mother, is not only gratifying but essential to portraying the character Ponette is in the film, it is the girl’s tears, the fluid, formless passageway to her own heart, that carry me to Ponette’s beauty—both tears and beauty existing in visual excess of language.

It’s interesting observing my own children. Quite often they have a concept but they can’t really express it in the way that adults would, because they just don’t have the vocabulary and the conceptual thinking. That doesn’t stop them from feeling things.

Rolf de Heer, “Production Notes” for *The Quiet Room*

Sitting precariously at the threshold of language, Ponette still experiences the visual—an easy slide for her heart—as a cognitive shock. Her mother’s visit is at once a psychic hurdle and an emotional bridge to her own emerging self-perception. Ponette is surrounded by a rousing ensemble of other small children performing their affection toward her, each in his/her own prescribed and imaginative language, but The

9. Woodward on mourning

10. *Contact* by Robert Zemeckis, 1997, is a perfectly appropriate example of the digital effects and spectacles to which I refer here; Jodie Foster mourns the loss of her deceased father, and her mother prior to that, for which she seeks to compensate precisely through the excesses of the visual that Zemeckis uses strategically in his film.

11. See Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44:6 (Summer 1991) 2-13.

12. The “Production Notes” for *Ponette* list the steps Jacques Doillon used to create the point of view of “la petite enfance” in his film: “Doillon first wrote a synopsis for the film, then sent video crews out to preschools all over France. The crews interviewed four- and five-year-olds, asking them their opinions on a variety of topics (including death); Doillon watched these tapes, then set up ‘workshops’ with the children he found to be the most outgoing, imaginative and willing to perform, (where) he talked to and played with the children, and set up skits with them... After six months... he wrote the screenplay using the dialogue he picked up from the workshop children, whom he then cast in the film.”

13. Gilbert-Rolfe, 40.

Girl in *The Quiet Room* is a child alone. While her mother, father and babysitter enter the frame occasionally, for the most part she is solitary in her blue room, her only companion and “reality check” being herself when she was three. And whereas Ponette at age four is pre-literate, The Girl, at age seven, is significantly not. She likes to read, to enter a story at different places, even, and to twist and pun on the nursery rhymes, fables and jokes she learned “ago.” More important, she is painfully aware of the value—and valuelessness—of words, or should we say, their negative value, the inherent potential of words to alienate and separate when they might communicate. Using this knowledge as a tool that flags its strategy and its goal as one and the same, she ceases to speak in order to show, not tell, her parents how they allow words to produce a superficial barrier between them.

Of course, it's her point of view that deems this barrier superficial, or rather, that regards words as the distorting and misleading mediating device between a mother and father who ought to be able to be a family with her. It's one thing that their performances thrive on words (we are not able to identify their conflicts because they generally transpire offscreen with only their heated voices arguing away); but it's another thing that the parents insist that The Girl re-enter language. The indulgence in this film, its thematic excess, is the lengths—temporal, conceptual, dramatic—to which The Girl will go to sustain her silence, though she would prefer not to. The film's formal indulgence is the spectator's privilege of hearing a performance saturated with words, The Girl's words, disembodied and strangely mediated by her parents' visible dialogue with her. The intimate offscreen presence of The Girl's private language allows her to perform her own relation to her pain in excess of the interventions she stages before our eyes. Her voice, another kind of “performance as presence,” demonstrates the paradoxical power and futility of language, in this case not only words but visual codes as well.

The fact is that The Girl's parents cannot see, in her performance of silence (which is hardly autistic, depressive, passive, or aggressive but very attentively expressive), a voiced protest against their failed verbal communication; nor can they see, through the drawings and paintings she creates, presents to them, and displays on her wall, a feeling beyond words that may not exist on her drafting paper but is certainly alluded to there. Her father is too preoccupied with his own frustration and misery to look; her mother looks, and cares, but sees only metaphors: dark clouds and red traffic lights—the morbid sights, danger signals, and stop signs that are the primitive language The Girl visualizes—and a single sketch of a three-member family that The Girl highlights for her mother as she shares it. The Mother can understand that her daughter desires family harmony, but the once-upon-a-time peace and joy and the subsequent loss and pain The Girl knows exceed her mother's grasp.

Much as The Girl resists verbal language by performing an expressive muteness, her sketched metaphors strike even The Girl as facile: “You see it, don't you? That's sharp; and

that's smooth in the *one* picture, *together*... Oh God, can't you see it, Mom? It's simple—so, so simple.” The artworks, far too numerous and repetitious in The Mother's view, both prompt and exceed her interpretation. “The visual is what's left when one has described a painting, not what might be brought to life by the description. What that does is to transfer everything that can be transferred from the realm of sight to that of the imagination, and imagination is of course defined as requiring the absence of the object which is being imagined.”¹⁴ The Girl imagines her wish: to live in the country, with a dog, with “family hugs,” parents who kiss each other “properly,” and a middle to get warm in—the sensations of being alive.

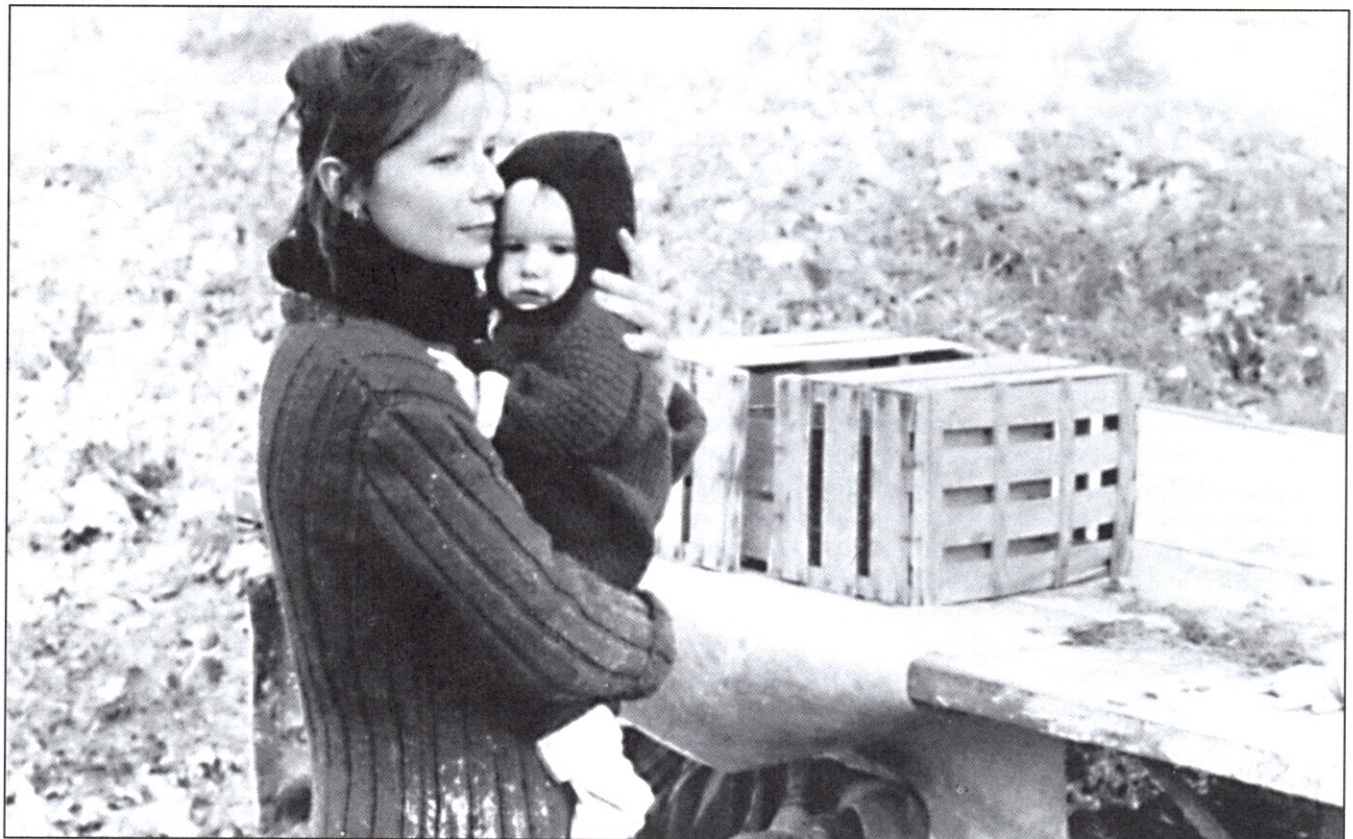
Her mother mediates this wish with words, but we might also consider the visual analog of verbal language, the film's mediation in the images of The Girl's performance. One strategy is the tilted frame of The Girl's head on her pillow as she falls asleep during the house party that precipitates her parents' first separation. An off-kilter angle on a familiar composition: The Girl alone in her bed. Yet neither the composition nor the angle tell us how to see, but only that there is another way of seeing. Later a mirror shot in reverse, which frames the actresses head-on as they use the mirror, a three-shot of The Mother, The Girl miming her, and The Girl's puppet miming The Girl but with her own on-screen speech for the first time in the film, reminds us how we enter language, but also how the visual in the cinema may offer multiple options for focus at any one moment—the challenge and the pleasure of sensing our feelings before we can choose how to think them.

To carry this notion further, there are The Girl's repeated returns of the gaze. That is, she peers directly into the camera, designating her look explicitly for the spectator, with no words accompanying her address. We know we should feel something at such a moment, but her look exceeds any one way we would code it. We may insert her image into one or another discourses of the film itself (of withdrawal, protest, or mourning, for example) or that we bring to it (perhaps a discourse of pathology), but her performed gaze on the one hand presses us for a response and on the other surpasses it. In defamiliarizing us with and alienating us from the perceptual process in which we are engaged (in which we presume to be taking and not making meaning), her returned gaze raises the very question of a surplus of feeling always on tap in the act of seeing.

I say “feeling” and not “thinking” because I regard concepts as emerging with language, a thought or an idea as that which can be abstracted into a metaphor, but a feeling as that more elusive experience that is captured only in part by an image. Put another way, the “look back” confronts us with the possibilities of “looking” per se, of seeing more than what is made to be seen, of seeing at once the capacity of language and that which it cannot contain. The “look back,” a sight without meaning—yet a sight that both begs and dares to be seen, louder without than with words—poses The Girl as more than an object to be named in language (through recognition) or in imagination (in the case of non-



Will There be Snow for Christmas?



recognition); it presents her performance as an *experience*, to be shared much in the same way as she confronts herself with her own past, muddled but recollected in a visceral child's vision of "ago," a "back then" that keeps wanting to take her back into it, even when she doesn't want to go.

To the extent that both Ponette's and The Girl's visions are endowed with memory (and very crucial, poignant, life-sustaining memory), bringing affection and inspiration for Ponette and creative pain for The Girl, they generate the experience of the visual *within* language as well as beyond it, since it is language that sees time as memory. We can appreciate this relation in regarding the film, *Will There Be Snow for Christmas?*, an homage to motherhood that proceeds to make time a factor in the experience of the visual. This approach is worth noting because it could easily be overlooked, given that time in the film is presented as the cycle of nature in the countryside, a mute character that is a rather antidiscursive force in the sense of its irreducibility to interpretation through language. If nature emerges poetically as a child resistant to the constraints of language, with a proclivity to surprise rather than to recognize, its performance is its very ephemerality, which can be seen and felt but not contained.¹⁵

What was difficult in writing this story was to sort out memories and mix them with fiction. It is all that moves in the interior of your head that is difficult... I think I didn't make this movie for others. I even did it against others. I wanted the film to relate to me...

Sandrine Veysset, Interview with Claire Denis,
Production File, *Will There Be Snow for Christmas?*

Setting her first feature on a farm in the south of France near her own childhood home in Avignon, Sandrine Veysset wanted to present a mother with very few choices in her life, including whether to bear children or not, and how to feed, clothe, and shelter them. While the film transpires in an era prior to our own, it is also timeless to the extent that Veysset wasn't interested in developing it as a period piece. Yet its internal time breathes with the rhythm of a heartbeat. Its editing contingent upon real time, and its camera at the center of the action, Veysset's film achieves a very physical relation to space and an equally visceral relation to the characters. Deliberately casting an unknown actress in the key role with the premise of creating real life for a woman and seven children and then seizing those moments for the screen, Veysset observes, "I think there was often more 'life' than 'film' in the shooting."¹⁶ Such performances, seemingly nontheatrical and even nondramatic, gain texture and depth from the ways that the natural elements act upon a place over time—the ways that heat, wind, rain, and cold, expected though uncontrollable, and yet inevitably changing, transform people's emotional outlooks.

Will There Be Snow for Christmas? increasingly poses its lead character, the mother, in a state of mourning as she notes her loss of faith and hope in her lover, her loss of love from the father of her seven children, as he seeks his own

comfort at their expense and resides in a nearby town with his wife and their own numerous children. The woman's poverty and subjugation set her worlds apart from the mothers in *The Quiet Room* and *Ponette*: Veysset's mother has no option to "move to the country," to set up a second household for the therapeutic experiment of separate lives. Her young daughters have no sports clothes to complain about, no preschools to confuse them, no worries about a "middle to get warm in" when they already sleep two or three to a bed. At the same time, their most consuming concern is the *presence*, not the absence, of the man their mother mourns.

As such this mourning is strictly an emotional one with no physical underpinnings. The children *have* a father; they just don't *want* him. The "death" the woman experiences, of her lover and herself, can be registered only at the symbolic level, and even their separation is only one of feeling. The tension in this feeling is between surface and depth, darkness and light, oppression and resilience, knowledge and hope. As time takes its toll, space prevails. By the very terms of her relation to her lover—that is, the strength of her labor and the support of her children—the woman has the house and the land, and what is interesting to see is how these spaces, hinging on the excesses of the characters' performances, increasingly displace the father and structure his absence, even if only at the emotional core of the film. What fills the center, then, is the affective bond between the mother and the children that evolves as an active exchange.

The film opens by establishing the difference between the children's and the father's relations to the spaces of the farm. Theirs is horizontal; his is vertical. Characteristically, the first we see is theirs. The pre-credit sequence places us in the midst of a hide-and-seek game in a barn. The camera eye is our own as we run and dodge bales of hay, chasing shadows in the golden light. The exhilaration of finding each other is all that guides us. Chimes in the wind and a xylophone enhance the merriment, but it's the last offscreen music we'll hear 'til the end of the film.¹⁷ The sound cuts abruptly to the roar of a tractor engine on a dusty road and a point of view from the driver's seat so high up we have the sense of God peering down on his creation. In no time this father attacks a son's "laziness," the mother defends the son at the family meal, the father strikes the mother, the eldest daughter comes between them, and the result is a separation in space: from the head of the table we look into the yard where the mother stands abreast of two daughters and casts a stone at the father through a barred window that frames those outside as captives.

The camera position and movement in the opening sequences and the use of the frame in the previous sequence are visually effective in employing a quietly denotative language; as the film progresses through the routines of daily life, the images gain a more connotative resonance through their juxtaposition and association. In one scene fireworks fill the sky of a summer night as the children "piggyback" on a distant celebration. In an autumn rain the camera moves from one to another smiling face when the smaller children make

a game of walking to school in a caravan, lifting a long plastic field sheet over their heads for an improvised umbrella.

The peace, self-reliance and good humor of these children would paint an idyllic picture of their life were it not for the preponderance of screen time spent on their relentless toil in the fields alongside their mother, overseen by the brutish father as he casts his self-contempt upon her and the children. He accuses the mother of rejecting him for someone else, tells her to take her brats and leave, and threatens that if she goes he'll bring harm to them all. Of course she hasn't tried to leave and has no way of leaving, and he leaves her for the company of others every time he comes; worse, what has precipitated the confrontation is his own pass at his own daughter, a crisis that seals the mother's despair. Her grief is visualized by her solitary figure in the expanse of the late autumn fields save for the baby in her arms, symbolic of nature's mute seasons, undeniable and irrevocable in the force of their presence. The frame wipes with black from its edges to the center for a brief cameo of the mother and child, the cameo itself then receding to blackness at the center.

If Ponette indulges in an earthly vision, and *The Girl* in memories and fantasies in the "quiet room" of her heart, the mother here, on a night when the family TV is broken, responds to a command performance of her dream as a sixteen-year-old. In fact it's the children's creation story, of how they came to life as her punishment for "vanity"—what should be cross-read by them as their mother's self-confidence but what God regarded as uppity arrogance. "It was in a cave full of light," she begins. When a child asks, "What did he look like?" and the mother responds, "You can't see God's face..." we know the children find their pleasure in the allegorical aspect of the tale, the mean God an allusion to their come-and-go father.

What exceeds the symbolic and imagistic language of the narrative is the context and the manner of the mother's telling it: its ritualistic role in their family pastimes, the radiance of the mother's performance as her eldest daughter massages her shoulders and the others gather round to marvel at her wit and humor, a stand-off against the darkness of her life. In contrast to the verbal/visual layers of this quasi-theatrical performance, a practice the mother has instilled in her children with their own hour for the singing of songs and telling of tales, her final performance in the film is entirely cinematic.

For Christmas Eve she has borrowed a heater from the school and pulled all the mattresses into one room where she and the children might sleep warm for a time. In the still of the night she leaves the bed and weeps as she caresses each child, then disengages the heat, leaving the hiss of the gas as she returns to bed. As she sleeps, an ominous buzzing grows from a hollow vibration to a whistling wind to a supernatural roar that awakens her. A nightmare, a fever, a wish for death? "No—" she gasps, and opens her eyes to a sky filled with snow. She runs to the window to feel the snow, then rouses her children who run down to play.

The film closes with their view of her from below, tossing their snowballs up at her window to draw her into their elation.

As the camera moves closer, their gaze becomes ours, their snow and ice crashing and melting, sliding over her smile through the glass, pelts of snow like blows to her heart, dripping tears from her eyes as her face fills the window that is our screen.

In a second miracle a moment later, which belongs not to nature but to the cinema, these joyous "tears of snow" are accompanied by a woman's offscreen voice bursting forth in song, a song of mourning, magic and despair. A "lover who shall not come" brings a "silken cortège of white tears, a frozen merry-go-round." We sense a relation between silence and song, absence and presence, that juxtaposes a woman's solitude with her children's active engagement of their mother. Such blows to the heart as formless and ephemeral as snow not only take on a voice, symbolically the mother's, but also present a tactile challenge to the visual suspended in time, a magic to be experienced both within and beyond the codes of realism.

Whereas in the cinema a voice or a character may function outside of a body, the visual is always present, and for this reason I have argued that in film, performance hinges not on events (as in narratives) nor on words (as in the theater) nor action (as in "the movies"), but on presence, which is visual if not always visible. That is, the language of a given film may strive to exclude the visible from time to time, but what will remain is its expectation—and the premise that the visual both precedes and exceeds language.

In the cinema absence can complement presence, reveal it as much as it conceals it, and the expression of the visual can take on either emphasis or irony in relation to sound or silence. And just as the screen is a window to the visual, and the procession of frames upon it a source of movement, time plays a role in performance by the mere fact of duration, the second dimension of cinema after space. Seeing-in-time defines the cinematic experience and therefore suggests pathways for appreciating performance.

If mourning is a process initiated by absence and loss, then perhaps time itself, with infinite indulgence and in the face of the ephemeral, is what allows affect to restore presence. And if presence embraces the visual that precedes and exceeds language, the cinema offers a singular opportunity for performance.

14. Gilbert-Rolfe, 41.

15. Veyssset, in an interview with French filmmaker Claire Denis in her production file for *Will There Be Snow for Christmas?*, explains, "The seasons are an important character in the film. How a place changes as time passes. I liked this idea of the transformation... especially of children who grow up very quickly. It was really very exciting to wonder how we were going to find them at each stage of the shooting... I enjoy very much all these changes that occurred without me, all those things that are uncontrollable and that transcend make-up or special effects."

16. Veyssset, Interview with Claire Denis, production file for *Will There Be Snow for Christmas?*

17. Veyssset, in the same interview with Claire Denis in her production file for *Will There Be Snow for Christmas?*, elaborates, "At the beginning I did not know if there would be music or not. It happened gradually... During the shooting, I imagined the movie as a silent one. I said to myself that even if there were no words, one should be able to understand the story... As for the music, I thought it would smooth the rough edges, make the movie less tough... and I did not want that... to hide its awkwardness, its imperfections. I don't like smooth things."

On Being Norman: Performance and Inner Life in Hitchcock's *Psycho*

by **Deborah Thomas**

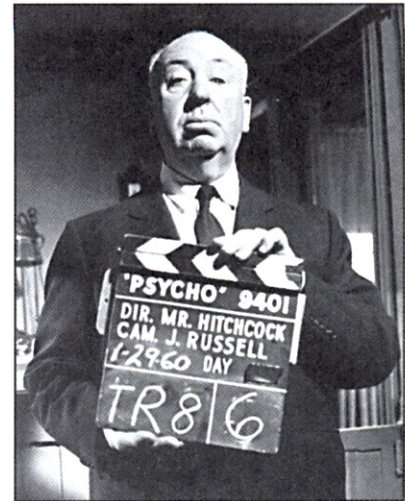
I would like to offer a tentative exploration of performance in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), concentrating on Anthony Perkins in the role of Norman Bates. This is far from straightforward. For one thing, Hitchcock is famous for his dismissive attitude to the importance of acting in creating our sense of characters in his films, adhering to the conclusions reached by Kuleshov to the effect that audiences use clues around an actor's appearance (such as the imagery of adjoining shots) to project onto the character their own expectations and responses, the actor's expressions having little to do with their readings. Although Hitchcock would be reluctant to admit it, such clues may not even be primarily *his*, as a television programme on the music of Bernard Herrmann attempted to demonstrate by showing part of the sequence where Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) drives towards the Bates Motel both with and without the accompanying music, our sense of Marion's state of mind very different in each case. Nevertheless, it has also been generally acknowledged, despite Hitchcock's apparent belittlement of actors, that there are fine and complex performances in his work, and that Anthony Perkins as Norman Bates is one of them.

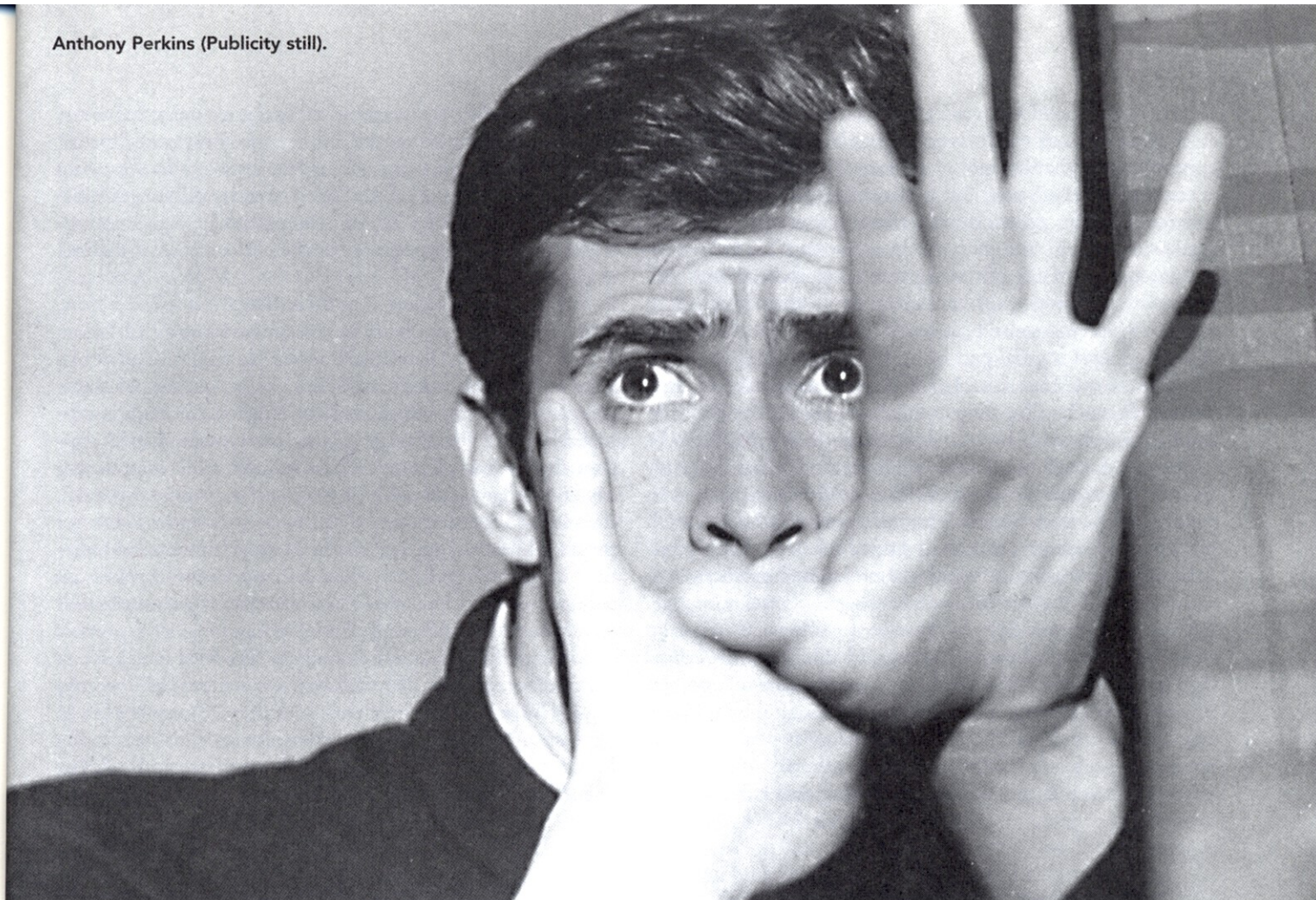
If disentangling Hitchcock's and Perkins's contributions from each other presents one sort of challenge, there are further difficulties in distinguishing amongst the various performances at stake, given that Norman himself 'performs' a number of roles, both as himself and as his mother, and to a number of different audiences (us, Marion, Arbogast/Martin Balsam, Sam/John Gavin and Lila/Vera Miles, the Sheriff/John McIntire, and - in their conversations together, where he plays both roles - his 'mother' and himself). There are complications too, perhaps, in the fact that the roles played by Norman exceed those played by Perkins: As Stephen Rebello points out (in *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, Mandarin Paperback edition, London, 1992), the voice we hear as 'Mother' does not belong to Perkins, but is "spliced and blended" from "a mixture of different voices" (p.133), nor is Perkins the figure who murders Marion in the shower:

Stuntwoman Margo Epper portrayed Mother in the sequence. An amused Tony Perkins recalled: "The crew always referred to Mother and Norman as *totally* separate people" (p.113).

However, such details need not detain us, since it is a commonplace that stand-ins are used from time to time, and this seems a similar sort of case (if more heavily foregrounded in the case of the voice). Still, we shall need to be careful not to attribute the construction of 'Mrs Bates' to Perkins himself, even though we may reasonably attribute it to Norman.

My interest is in the link between an actor's performance and the 'inner life' of the





enacted character. In other words, in the present case, what conclusions can we draw about Norman's awareness, motivations, and feelings from the performance details available to us? What does Norman know? What does he want? What does it *feel like* to be Norman? Yet another complication in this very complicated film is that what *we* know, as opposed to what Norman knows, is radically different on a first and second viewing, given the suppression of our knowledge that Norman's mother is dead until very late in the film. Does this change the way we think about Norman on subsequent viewings? Clearly, in some sense, it does, yet oddly enough not in terms of the questions just posed (his knowledge, motives and feelings). If Norman is deceiving us, it is only because he is deceiving himself, or, rather, his deceptions are to prevent his 'mother' from being found out for Marion's murder, so what he tries to hide from Arbogast, Sam and Lila, but not from us (that Marion was at the motel, that she—and, later, Arbogast—are dead), is a product of the larger illusion, which we share with him, that his mother is still alive. In contrast to his deceptiveness towards those investigating Marion's disappearance later, with Marion herself he is largely truthful, at least in terms of what he himself believes to be true. This sincerity is conveyed by his ready and disarming smiles and the raised eyebrows above wide-open eyes—in Norman's own words to Arbogast, "...I must have one of those faces you just can't help believing"—as well as by the intensity of his more

serious moments when he is critical of the facile nostrums Marion offers for his ills.

Our first view of Norman is not as himself, but as 'Mother', visible through the window of the house behind the Bates motel. His mother appears in two forms in the film: as Norman's enacted version of her and as a corpse. The fact that what we have here is Norman-as-mother, rather than his mother's corpse is made clear by the fact that the figure is walking past the window, rather than sitting still. However, once Marion attracts Norman's attention by honking the horn of her car, he appears as himself, hurrying down the stairs from the house, having cast off his wig and dress very quickly indeed. In a gesture that will be repeated later in the film, Norman holds the upturned collar of his jacket tightly closed against the rain, as he lopes down the stairs towards Marion. Hitchcock's withholding of the fact that Mrs Bates is dead depends on our never seeing Norman in a transitional state between being himself and being his mother (that is, we never see him *becoming* 'Mother'). In fact, even with the final revelation near the end of the film, when Norman's 'costume' falls off, revealing him beneath the wig and dress, we don't see his psychological change from one identity to the other, but rather see him in a state of crisis which, as we later learn, leads to his remaining immobilised in his identity as 'Mother', finally unable to return to being Norman, as he does so quickly and seamlessly offscreen when Marion first

arrives at the motel and makes her presence known.

I think we must take it as given that Norman is never consciously aware that his mother is dead. This carries with it as a consequence, however, that he must also have no conscious awareness of his transformations into his mother and back again to himself, but must be in some sort of trance, his behaviour that of an unthinking automaton throughout these offscreen moments, with no memory of them but just a vaguely troubling sense of a series of gaps. That these gaps add up to a substantial part of his life is already suggested in our first view of him. Clearly, when no customers are around, he spends much of his time in this state. His 'hobby' is not so much taxidermy (as he tells Marion) as 'being Mother'. In this context, both his wistful comment that "a hobby's supposed to *pass* the time, not *fill* it" and Marion's question in response—"Is your time so empty?"—pinpoint his situation with some accuracy. His time is empty not in the sense of its lacking purpose, but in its being short of memorable events, or at least of those that he can consciously acknowledge. Norman's backtracking in answer to Marion's question "No...uh...Well, I...I run the office and...uh...tend the cabins and grounds and...and do little...uh...errands for my mother, the ones she allows that I might be capable of doing"—is also significant. Of all his onscreen moments, it is precisely as he is cleaning up after Marion's murder shortly afterward—when he is 'tending' the cabin and doing an 'errand' for his

mother by hiding the evidence of 'her' guilt—that he comes closest to seeming 'entranced' in the sense I suggested earlier, at least after the initial shock of Marion's murder has worn off. His face has none of the mobility and apparent readability he seemed to offer Marion earlier, but appears emotionless and completely caught up in the performance of the task in hand.

The film makes clear that 'Mrs Bates' has killed before. Therefore, Norman's claim, in his conversation with Marion, that his mother is "harmless" and *not* "a raving thing," seems to be an outright lie, unless this too can be taken as an example of the extent to which his knowledge of the truth is suppressed and denied. Surely it is no more outlandish to suppose that he can clean up after a murder, while suppressing any knowledge of his mother's guilt (not to mention his own), than it is to suppose that he can look upon and address her corpse while denying her death. Norman's mental obliteration of painful realities, while he nonetheless behaves as required to uphold his illusions, fits in with his expressionless demeanour as he tidies up. And yet, a number of aspects of Perkins's performance reveal that, at some level which is not quite fully conscious, Norman *does* know more than we may think. [Indeed, the claim that his mother is "harmless" is, in one sense, absolutely true, if we allow Norman to be referring to his mother's corpse, and not to himself-as-mother.] The self-satisfied smiles which cross his face when what he knows



Norman and Marion: the first encounter

gives him pleasure (smiles which are very different from the friendly and ingratiating ones he gives Marion at other points), and the way he trips over his words when the knowledge is painful, are partial evidence of his struggles with the truth, as are his hesitations at several key moments.

In many ways, Norman is quite astute, with an ironic appreciation of Marion's pretenses. For example, he picks up very quickly on her reluctance to write her address in the motel register and tells her that the town will do, and, when she tells him her real name later, he remembers that she'd signed in under another one. Equally, he is able to be ironic about himself, as when he points out the motel stationery and tells Marion she can use it if she wants to fill her friends back home with envy. So Norman's naiveté as a wide-eyed and friendly young man is undercut by the sharpness and accuracy of his critical assessment of Marion, particularly when he takes offense at her suggestion that he put his mother away in an institution and condemns her hypocritical complacency. His shrewd tight-lipped hint of a smile when he checks her false name in the register matches his smile when the car with her body in it sinks into the swamp, implying a moment of much fuller awareness and satisfaction than his behaviour as a dutiful son cleaning up after his mother would suggest. That many of his stammerings are on words with heavily weighted significance is also relevant here. Thus, he tells Marion he will be back "with m...with my trusty umbrella," and that "the expression 'eats like a bird' is really a fal...fal...fals...falsity," and his later stammering description to Arbogast of his mother as an "invalid" opens up questions (both for Arbogast and for Norman) as to her actual state while simultaneously raising issues of validity and invalidity in their epistemological sense, akin to the respective issues of trustiness and falsehood in the other examples.

Norman's lack of conscious knowledge of his mother's death, and thus of his own guilt, is very precariously suppressed, and this is only made possible, as we've seen, by transforming much of his life into a series of inexplicable gaps. His description of being in a private trap—"We scratch...and claw, but only at the air..." presents us with an image of him surrounded by nothing more substantial than empty space, mirroring his experience of much of his life as unfathomably empty time. His posture continually evokes withdrawal from the surrounding world, whether through the way his coat collar is held tightly closed against the rain when Marion first arrives, or the way he keeps his hands in his pockets as he enters the kitchen after spying on Marion and, later, as he greets Lila and Sam on their arrival at the motel, or the manner in which he sits in the parlour with his hands clasped as Marion eats. This is a body making as little space for itself in the world as possible, pulling back from contact with its troubling realities which present themselves to him as thin air. Such postures get part of their meaning in contrast with those of Norman-as-mother, when both her strong voice and the stabbing motions of her powerful arm carve out a place for herself in the world with bold and assertive strokes. However, Norman's shrinking postures also get much of their meaning in contrast with those of Sam in the open-

ing scene and Marion in the shower.

Sam and Marion are presented from the start of the film as creatures of the flesh, their half-naked states emphasising the softness and vulnerability of their bodies. (Indeed, as Marion drives away from Phoenix with the money she's stolen from Cassidy/Frank Albertson, an unpleasant wealthy client of her boss, the point is made explicit as she imagines Cassidy threatening to replace the money with "her fine soft flesh.") As Sam sprawls in a chair, his legs apart, and talks to Marion about seeing her again, agreeing to her conditions that they meet in more respectable circumstances than in a cheap hotel, he spreads his arms, the palms facing outward, both displaying his half-naked body and seeming to offer it to Marion, just as she will appear to surrender her body to the stream of water from the showerhead just before her murder. The cheap hotel where Sam and Marion have stolen a lunch hour together, and Marion's unfinished sandwich lunch, will find their equivalents in the Bates Motel and the sandwich supper which Norman provides. But if Norman is thus, in some sense, another version of Sam, his hunched up posture and the gesture of holding up his hand as though to ward off the world, rather than to offer himself to Marion, are very different. In place of Sam's 'fleshiness' is Norman's angularity, his thin, bony shoulders and the workings of his jaw as he munches candy throughout the film reminding us of the skeleton beneath the skin. If Norman has no conscious knowledge of his mother's corpse, his own body reminds us of the corpse within us all, his repressed memories surfacing in his own body which bears the marks of his mother's fate.

Similarly, the physical coldness of Norman's world contrasts with the heat of Sam's and Marion's. Clearly, their hotel room is warm enough for them to sit and talk in comfort without being fully dressed, whereas Norman seems always to be cold, both on his first appearance in the rain when he holds his jacket closed at the neck and when, as 'Mother' at the end of the film, he asks a policeman for a blanket which he clutches around him in a similar way. If the atmosphere in Marion's office is described by Cassidy as being "hot as fresh milk" (an image of suffocating maternal warmth), Norman talks, in contrast, about how his mother's room would become "cold and damp, like a grave" if he weren't there to light the fire, later telling Arbogast that he always changes the motel sheets each week, whether they've been used or not, since he hates the smell of dampness ("such a creepy smell"). Despite all Norman's efforts at wiping out his knowledge of the past, he carries it with him as the cold, "creepy" touch of the grave. On the one hand, the film offers us a vision of warm flesh and a heavy oppressive atmosphere as hot as fresh milk. On the other hand, Norman's world is cold and damp, like the grave, its atmosphere thin and anaemic, his angular body a reminder of the skeletons within us all.

What we have seen so far is that the question, 'What does Norman know?', has no easy answer. Although, in one sense, he knows very little, this is continually belied by the deeper knowledge carried by his body and by Perkins's performance. The contrast between his ready and disarmingly friendly smiles to Marion and his more private knowing smirks, as well

as his stammerings when issues of truth and falsehood arise, suggest a constant battle between acknowledging and suppressing darker areas of awareness and a darker aspect to his psyche. But beyond the specific question of whether Norman knows that his mother is dead and that he's complicit in the murders she commits, Norman's body carries within it a more general knowledge which Sam and Marion lack: the apprehension that the ways of the flesh are futile, since death inhabits us all. This pessimism inheres in Norman's experiencing the world as cold and sparse, rather than as warm and full-bodied, and in the consequent way his body seems to contract and pull back from the world around it. Closely connected to the discussion so far, is the second question about Norman's inner life: What does Norman *want*?

The question of Norman's motivation is even more difficult to work out than that of the extent of his knowledge, given both the extreme attenuation of his inner life and his lack of insight into the conflicts in his desires which are represented by his identity as Norman and his acquired identity as his mother. Even as Norman, he both owns up to and disavows his desires: for example, he tells Marion he no longer minds having been born into his private trap, but when she challenges him by saying he *should* mind, he quickly adds, "Oh, I *do*, but I say I don't." So we will need to pay attention to something other than his words. I would like to concentrate on the moments which lead up to Marion's murder and to raise the question of what Norman wants as he returns to the house after watching Marion undress.

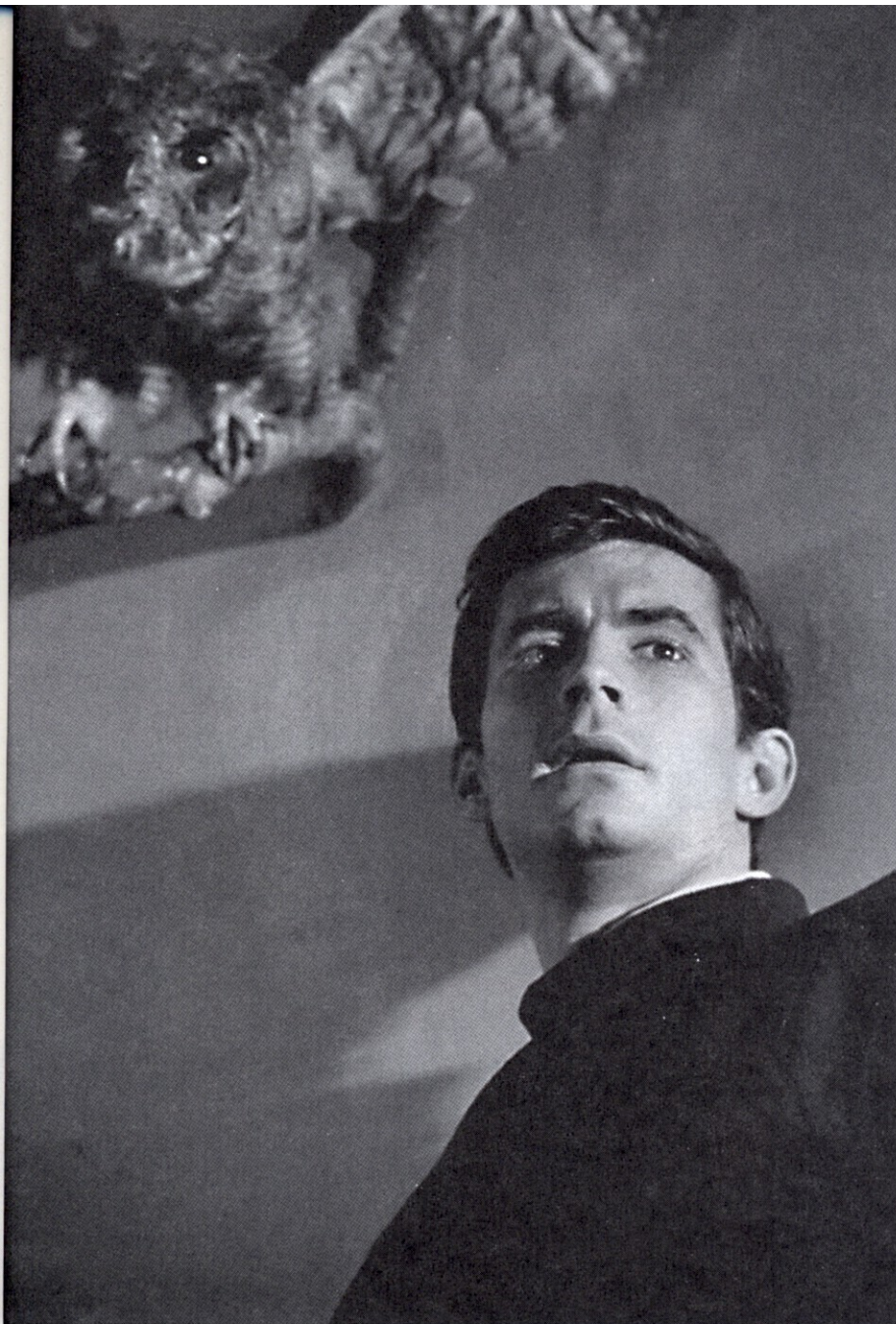
Norman's voyeurism confirms that, as we've already seen, his identity as Norman is divided between the friendly open-faced sincerity he offers Marion and the sly, more secretive pleasures he takes in various private moments when he's somehow getting the better of others (seeing that Marion has used an alias, watching her undress, hiding her body in the swamp). In addition, his identity as Norman in both its aspects appears to contrast with his identification with his mother in both of *her* manifestations: as the argumentative knife-wielding figure he enacts through his own voice and body who inhabits the world with such bold and sweeping strokes, and as the passive corpse that can do no harm. So his desires are much more complex than the psychiatrist at the end of the film would have us believe when he contrasts Norman's sexual desires for women with the jealous rages of the 'mother' side of himself who kills such women in retaliation, since both Norman-as-himself and Norman-as-mother have two sides. Further, the psychiatric explanation makes no sense of the killing of Arbogast and the attempted killing of Lila (neither of whom arouses Norman's desires), since the covering up of the crimes and the deflection of curious intruders have so far seemed to be Norman's responsibility in his own guise and not in that of his mother, who has little apparent concern with being found out.

Rather than reducing Norman's desires to the sexual and the aggressively punitive, we need to look more carefully at the meaning of the hesitations which punctuate Perkins's performance at several points. For example, what are we to make of the way Norman hesitates as he chooses a cabin for

Marion, his hand hovering and finally selecting the key to the cabin adjacent to the office? Is he wavering between his desire for a chance to spy on Marion and the jealous disapproval he knows his 'mother' would feel, as the psychiatrist would have us believe? Or between his desire to spy on Marion and his own sense—as the friendly, smiling version of Norman, rather than the furtive, smirking one—that this would be wrong? Or is he struggling between the belief that he means what he says about the convenience of Marion's being so near the office if she should need anything, and the realisation that his motives are less pure? Or, finally, is his desire to see Marion undress in conflict with a memory of a previous murder by his mother of another woman in the same cabin and a wish to protect Marion from a similar fate? [His inability to pronounce the word 'bathroom' when showing Marion her room may also be the result of a half-remembered murder there, rather than excessive prudery, especially as he talks about his mother's lover readily enough.] Of course, there is no way of answering such questions with any certainty. That his mother is, somehow, a factor in his hesitation may be implied by the slight movement of his head as he gazes over his left shoulder (a look to the left of the screen which he repeats more firmly after the spying scene itself, when it is more clearly directed toward the house and his mother inside it). However, unless Norman 'knows' that he and his mother are one and the same, it is difficult to see why he would imagine that Marion's being in one cabin rather than another should make much difference to her. Again, we are back to the fact that Norman's knowledge is very precariously suppressed, and his identification with his mother and her desires invades even those moments when he is being Norman.

The murder of Marion has been spoken of as a sort of displaced rape (see, for instance, Robin Wood's account in *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, Faber and Faber, London, 1989, p. 149). This too makes it hard to see the murder merely as an act of jealous retribution on the part of 'Mother', or to see the conflict between seeing and desiring Marion, on the one hand, and punishing her, on the other, as a satisfactory description of Norman's contradictory desires. Given Norman's clear desire to spy on Marion and thus to assert himself by intruding upon her privacy and space, though still from a distance, the stabbing is more akin to an intensified version of the same thing than to a simple act of jealous rage. The invasive act of spying is a tentative reversal of the contraction of his body which characterises Norman at other moments, and the stabbing extends this invasion of Marion's world to its full extent. Thus, Norman-as-mother is a Norman able to make his mark upon the world, rather than remaining a nervous young man unable to do more than keep his distance. The voyeurism is an intermediate stage in this journey from Norman to 'Mother'.

In this light, Norman's return to the house behind the motel after he spies on Marion becomes all the more moving when he hesitates about going upstairs (to check on his mother? to *become* his mother?), before going into the downstairs kitchen instead. The vision of him seated at the kitchen



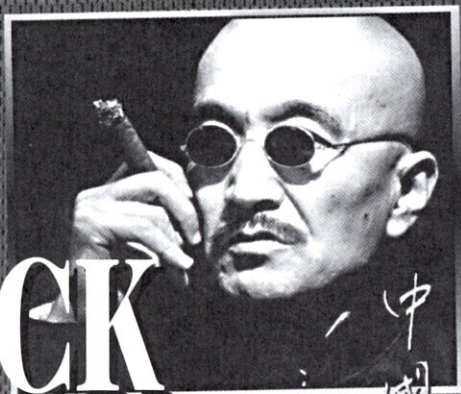
ground as he looks anxiously about him. Similarly, a bit later, when the car momentarily stops sinking into the swamp, he again looks around him, giving the same impression of being completely at a loss. He is not so much helpless at such moments as *bewildered*, as if the world's workings are arbitrary and beyond his comprehension.

So Norman's desires can be said to assail him in a random and chaotic way, belonging to various separate and conflicting sides of himself rather than to a coherent personality with an organised sense of purpose, or even to two such personalities with clear battlelines between them. At those moments when we would most expect such confusions to prevail, he seems to hesitate, freeze in his tracks or go blank (or, as I described it earlier, become 'entranced'), as the only way of avoiding his identity shattering into pieces in the face of his contradictory desires. These little 'deaths' as he appears to go blank, suggest that his ultimate desire may be a wish for nothingness or annihilation as an alternative to unbearable knowledge and conflicting desires, a wish to be 'Mother' not in her aggressively punitive version but as a corpse, which is finally fulfilled at the end of the film in Norman's stillness and passivity as the skeletal grin of his mother as corpse is superimposed on his smile.

By looking closely at the details of Anthony Perkins's performance as Norman—as well as at Norman's performances of various roles within the narrative, both as himself and as his mother—we have pinpointed some of the difficulties and some of the possible conclusions we

may reach in trying to determine what Norman knows and desires. What it *feels like* to be Norman follows on from the results of this exploration. The chaos of Norman's conflicting desires and of the conflicting aspects of his personality is countered by his partial refusal of such knowledge, leaving him with an attenuated version of himself on the road to nothingness: in this state, he feels cold, he feels empty, he feels something like death. In one way, the psychiatrist is correct in saying that, after Marion's murder, "Norman returned as if from a deep sleep," though I would want to emphasise the continuing sense of absence and bemusement—the lack of fullness in his life, the sense that he lives a waking dream—which remains through much of his time as Norman, and not merely during those moments when the vengeful mother takes him over. For all these reasons, Norman remains a sympathetic figure even on repeated viewings of the film.

I have not offered a reading of *Psycho* as a whole. There are



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many excellent accounts to which I have added very little. Instead, I have attempted to look at a single character and the way our sense of him is not only a matter of such things as dialogue, visual treatment, narrative strategies, and so on, but of such details as bodily posture and movement, facial expressions, gestures, hesitations, and vocal delivery as well. However, if the performance details of a given character can never be understood fully in isolation from those meanings which are provided by the techniques and strategies of the film as a whole, neither should they be seen apart from the performances of other characters in the film, since part of their significance may be a structural matter, dependent on how one character's performance mirrors or contrasts with those of other characters in various ways. Therefore, I would like to conclude with a brief look at Marion asleep in her car in the course of her flight from Phoenix, as Marion too, like Norman, appears to waken "from a deep sleep."

The landscape around Marion's car is barren and deserted and is reminiscent of the desert landscape which hangs on the wall above her desk at work, while simultaneously providing a link with our later sense of Norman as surrounded by empty space. Many of her facial expressions throughout her drive towards Norman are similar to his: the wide-open eyes and furrowed brow, the sly smile as she too takes pleasure in her having got the better of someone else (Cassidy, in this case, whose money she has stolen). Like Norman later in the film, Marion hears voices in her head in the course of her drive. She imagines the reactions of her boss, of Cassidy and of various others to the discovery of her disappearance and theft, as well as Sam's reaction to her turning up with the stolen money. William Rothman suggests that Marion's imaginings comprise a sort of "private film" which is "projected onto the inner screen of her imagination" (*Hitchcock: the Murderous Gaze*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 261).

I would like to explore a slightly different way of construing her subjective experiences in the course of her journey, centred upon the *abrupt* fade to black which accompanies and, presumably, represents the *sudden* break in Marion's consciousness as she falls asleep. It may seem odd that Hitchcock has chosen to present *this* moment as such a rupture, through his use of the fade, rather than the much more severe break in her consciousness when she's murdered in the shower. Perhaps one explanation, which links her to Norman, is that the fade marks a break in the narrative where all that follows can be seen as Marion's dream. We have seen how Norman's desire to carve out a space in the world by becoming the vengeful version of 'Mother' may be seen to screen a deeper desire for death and nothingness, a desire to become his mother-as-corpse. Perhaps we can understand Marion's desires in a similar way. In other words, her vengeful pleasure in stealing the money and running away to Sam (a kind of revenge on Sam, as well as on Cassidy, both in implicating him in her crime and in giving him no further grounds to put off their marriage) may be seen to screen a desire for her own annihilation.



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